

HTTYD Easter Special

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Summary: Sequel to "The Unholy Offspring," set after the season finale. When Alvin the Treacherous threatens Asgard with a rogue demigod's help, Hiccup and Berk's Dragon Riders must prevent an early Ragnorak. It doesn't help that Alvin has learned to tame dragons, and that the only god that can help Hiccup is a sullen, suspicious boy named Mud. Happy Eos week, Hiccup!

1. Prologue

Springtime. The time when grass and stubborn flowers pierced the coldest, toughest terrains. An era when the winter wrapped itself in a white blanket and died like a venerable grandmother recollecting mouthwatering chicken and perch.

It was a time to celebrate Eos, the goddess of fertility, with decorated eggs. The few Vikings who remembered Eos painted their poultry with pictures of white horns and blue clouds, hiding them in their mountainous terrain.

Do not celebrate, gentle Vikings! Do not put aside your weapons to worship the few flowers that have melted the snow. That is what the blue skies should have told all people in the Archipelago, for Eos was not free.

Picture this scene: a dimly lit chamber with few torches, metal stumps hammered to form a star shape. In the center, a woman no taller than a juvenile oak and just as skinny, standing stiffly and scolding. One could see the walls through her, the cracks between the crude stones. A slice of rainbow glittering beneath her bare feet and fluttering, a bundle of dripping laundry.

Then a larger, intimidating figure entered the room.

"What's this all about?" he asked the man with the incantation book in front of him.

"We've done as you said, Alvin." The man scratched his red nose. "Made the star-shape thingy out of iron wood, call on the Odin-force to summon Death's woman Heluth."

Alvin faced the woman. The green eyes held an unsettling familiarity, although her white shift fluttered with innocence. Flowers were woven in her blond, greying hair.

"Are you Heluth?"

"Oh yes," she responded with a heavy Scottish accent, swirling her fingers to summon dandelions. "I am the half-dead queen of the Underworld who was kidnapped as a baby for fear of my role in Ragnorak, daughter of Loki may eternity laugh at his jokes forever, and patron for Gothic fashion. I highly applaud the use of unpolished chains and dirty hair."

"Sarcastic and well-informed," he responded. "You're not the death goddess."

"What tipped you off? The flowers or the dress?" she scoffed. "Heluth can't leave the Underworld until Ragnorak, so anyone who tries to summon her is daft."

She blew on the floating dandelions so that they flew at Alvin. He jumped back as they hit an invisible barrier.

At least the idiots had crafted the pentagram right. Alvin didn't want hay fever with the chilly winds on Outcast Island. He couldn't afford to get sick now.

"Now will you be so kind as to send me back?" the woman demanded. "This laundry won't hang itself and I have to get dinner started for my charges." She gestured at the white tunics and undershirts soaking around her feet.

The man started to mumble the incantation.

"Wait." Alvin got closer. "I remember eyes like those. It belonged to a woman with whom I once dueled. The prize of Berk she was, famed for her white arms."

"I am not that woman," she said. The sarcasm disappeared from her voice.

"She had two suitors, one who was the chief's son and one who was a stupid hero. The stupid hero went on a fool's quest and became a slave. The white-armed woman then killed him and she tried to kill me, for I had sent the hero on that quest."

Alvin took out his sword. The woman took a step back, but not quickly enough. The tip pointed at her heart.

"It's good to see you again, though I was expecting you to still be tall and stout."

"I am not that woman."

He thrust the sword forward. The woman recoiled. She was not solid,

so the blade merely twisted the white fog that composed her body. When he withdrew his right arm, the fog took a while to rearrange itself.

"She had that expression on her eyes when she died; that shock, fear and anger."

"I am not that woman," Eos repeated. "If I once was, that woman died a long time ago."

"But her son and husband didn't. How they grieved, how the entire village mourned her passing. How little she cared in death."

"I was dead! When you die, it takes eons to start caring about life-"

Alvin smirked. She flinched.

"I knew it was you. Shame your family doesn't." He turned to the guard. "Keep her here."

Beware, Vikings! Beware, Asgard! Alvin the Treacherous has the goddess Eos trapped on his island. Dragon blood dripped from his beard not long ago, hot and nurturing. If not for that blood, then he wouldn't have had the gall to place a trap for Heluth, goddess of the Underworld. The gods wouldn't have approved if they knew, and maybe they did. Note that the dragon did not die on the hostile island. He managed to fly for a few hundred miles, limping and clutching a stone on a broken cord.

The dragon did die, let me tell you. It just had to reach Berk first.

2. Chapter One

I normally update one chapter a day, but making an exception so that the story can get rolling. I may post the prequel to this story, "The Snoggletog Special," if people are interested in cameos of Norbert the Nutjob.

This story takes place several months after the season one finale of Riders of Berk. Alvin has attempted to start a dragon army. Up to now he has been unsuccessful thanks to an annoying and large brown dragon named Ivor. Ivor is finally defeated, but he manages to make it to Berk . . .

Spring. A time when flowers appeared on Berk for the first time in months, Bog Roses that could actually be plucked in their season. The chickens had hatched extra eggs in celebration of the sprouting colors and Eos Week. Few actually carried out the dancing with flowers and distribution of seed, but Berk found a use for their sudden bounty.

"Hey, I found one!" Tuffnut held up a painted object, face and hands smeared with mud. His helmet had gained several scratches and stood at an off angle.

"Give me that." Ruffnut yanked the purple egg from him. "You need to wait for them to rot before breaking them. Otherwise it's not

fun."

"Go find your own. This one's mine!"

They tussled, and somehow the egg slipped from their hands and soared through the air. A curious, two-headed Zippleback shot gas and sparks at the egg, so that it exploded into bits of brown goo.

"So the yolk IS flammable," Fishlegs said with fascination.

This was the opening egg hunt on Berk, to celebrate. The younger kids, those who hadn't hit their growth spurts, had wisely headed out to the beach to find their treasures. The Dragon Riders, needing to keep their collateral damage accountable, had to stay together. Snotlout had gone off with Hookfang to explore the cove, and Fishlegs kept to a safe distance away from the twins, observing them.

Hiccup slapped a dirty palm to his forehead as he watched the twins wipe the scorched remains of egg from their faces. Toothless sniffed the ground, ignoring the chaos in front of him.

"When did egg hunts get so complicated?" Hiccup asked Astrid, who sat on Stormfly with a laden basket.

"When you put dragons into the mix," she responded with a smile. "You've already found three this morning."

"Yeah. Well." Hiccup looked down. "Gobber always hides a few in the smithy. He got Bucket to paint them."

They were commemorative images; one egg showed Hiccup and Toothless soaring among the cliffs in miniature. Another depicted Chief Stoick on Thornado. The third showed a blond woman in a Viking helmet, sewing a dragon toy with a placid expression.

She punched him. "You got an advantage then, and a bigger lunch."

Hiccup shook his head. "I don't think I could eat these."

"They're eggs, Hiccup. They'll go rotten."

"Bucket painted my mother on them."

Astrid took a moment to provide a sensible answer. "Then ask him to paint you a REAL painting. One that will last longer."

Hiccup gave a tight smile. He fingered the flat blond locks on the last egg. That same toy in the picture now rested by his bed, small and frail. To think he had once been terrified of something so tiny.

Then again, Toothless had once frightened him, when they had been enemies.

As if Toothless could hear his thoughts, the Night Fury lifted his head from the ground. He turned to the skies and squawked. A shadow darkened the whole forest in response.

"Bud? What is it?" Hiccup also followed his dragon's gaze. His jaw

dropped open.

He had once fought a dragon of that size, big as two mountains and as bad-tempered as a maelstrom. This one was a crusty brown, the color of freshly turned soil mixed with seawater, and its wings were larger. And, great Thor, a loud thundering came from it that sounded like WORDS.

I ARRIVE IN PEACE!

Hiccup covered his ears. So did the rest of the group. The dragon stopped and circled over them, limping in the air.

"Did my ears twist, or did that dragon talk?" Tuffnut asked. Ruffnut grabbed his ear and twisted it. "Ow! No, it's talking."

"Let's go, bud." Hiccup hopped on Toothless. Astrid did the same. They flew up to meet the dragon.

"Great Odin, it's hurt!" Astrid exclaimed, seeing a wicked gash stretched along its thick neck.

The brown dragon hovered upward to give them space. Its claws clutched around a small, red-stained object.

I COME IN PEACE, it repeated in an attempt to whisper. Hiccup and Astrid still had to cover their ears. YOU RIDE MY NEPHEW, FRECKLED HUMAN?

"Nephew?" Hiccup managed, looking down at Toothless. "Toothless, you mean?"

FURY, SON OF GRIS WITH THE SOLEMN EYES. The dragon came closer and stretched its wings. YOU HELPED HIM ESCAPE MY FATHER'S MADNESS.

"Um, what?"

The dragon flew higher; its chest wound became more prominent now that Hiccup and Toothless hovered under it, even though the wings flapped in darkness. Hiccup felt a twinge of misgiving, but the dragon was not attacking.

"Hiccup!" His father's voice, the rush of Thornado's wings.

TAKE THIS, HUMAN! The large claw opened, and a circular, shiny object tumbled towards Hiccup. So did a wave of blood. The gash had reopened, and the dragon gasped as it lost the vital fluid. A white glaze crept over its large, scaly eyes.

Hiccup couldn't fly out of the way in time, not with his hand reaching. Stormfly had edged Astrid so that she received a mere splash. He flashbaked to when he and Toothless had nearly escaped the Green Death's explosive fireball, and lost his-

Not the time to think about that! Not when the current of red knocked him and Toothless out of the air, jammed the pedals and tail-fin. A hard stone banged against his chest and stuck; he yanked at it and found himself falling.

TELL HER I'M SORRY! TELL MUD IT'S NOT HIS FAULT!

"How?" Hiccup choked through a lungful of burning dragon blood, feeling himself and Toothless tumble, hearing his father cry out in alarm.

The dragon gave an answer, this time in a softer tone. Hiccup heard it before red pain crashed against him.

* * *

><p>Death does not often make a splash in the large ocean. A stopped breath is hardly noticed in a world where ants and bugs get easily crushed.<p>

Yet two figures felt the brown dragon's death, vibrating to their large island. The crystals around them rattled. The first figure, which resembled a grey mountain with wings, let out a mournful cry. It bowed its head and wept for brave Ivor, loyal brother.

The second figure hugged her as best as he could, although he barely reached her waist. Tears would not come from his hard eyes. Instead, he looked to the setting sun and the horizon, a sense of failure overwhelming him.

Brave Ivor had lost the rune stone and died; the rune stone should have protected him from harm. But the stone had failed. Its maker had failed.

The small figure focused on the horizon. The waves carried on against the darkening skies. He wished he could hear the dragon's last words instead of that constant, uncaring roar of water.

* * *

><p>"Go to Rainbow Isle."<p>

Hiccup spoke these words after spitting out the burning blood. He and Toothless had crashed into soggy mud; the dragon's blood had soaked the ground below and softened their fall. Although they resembled blooms of red algae in the summertime, neither was injured.

"Hiccup! Are you all right?" His dad landed with distaste on the bloodied ground. "Did the dragon hurt you?"

The boy did not respond. An automatic spring came to his step. He hopped to his feet and staggered off.

"Hiccup! Where are you going?"

"If you're looking for the dragon, it flew away!" Gobber called from a distance. "Went and crashed into the sea just off Raven Point!"

Hiccup kept staggering downhill. The twins, who had gotten washed away, followed on their dragon. So did Astrid, albeit at a slower pace.

He looked quite a sight, almost demented with his unfocused eyes and wavering stumble. A grey stone, remarkably unblemished from the blood, clung to Hiccup's chest. It seemed to glow in the restored

sunlight. He reached both hands forward as a small pond came in view.

"Water," he muttered. His gait grew faster, almost to a run as he dove through the protective rocks and splashed into the pond.

"Hiccup!" Stoick followed. "You'll need soap to get all that blood off."

He shook his head and bent so that his hands touched the reddening surface. The pond's ripples evaporated at the touch.

Everyone stopped. Toothless watched with suspicion. The twins made "ooing" sounds. Hazy images formed as Hiccup straightened up. His eyes regained focus.

"The dragon was injured fighting Alvin on Outcast Island," he said. "The thing it was carrying, gods, it kept it alive."

He looked down at its chest. The stone gleamed against the red. Toothless joined him in the water to sniff it.

"It died when it gave the stone to me," Hiccup said in wonder. Then the images started moving.

The brown dragon's last moments in life played out over the pond: scratchy roars, glinting steel, various flames. The sensation of rushing past dark cages, ramming into unsuspecting helmets. Then into the open air, a triumphant cry as the brown dragon liberated hundreds of captive dragons. No more darkness and confinement!

That's when the army came. Tormented Nadders and Gronckles, a Scauldron swirling in the water. Men riding them, swinging axes at the rider less ones.

Ivor- that was the brown dragon's name- stopped leading them and got behind them. He'd hold off the army so that his brethren could flee, and he did. His flames were magnificent carpets of orange and red that smothered the dragon riders. His tail swung like a spiked club, crumbling Outcast Island's cliffs into deadly boulders. Perhaps he could have escaped too, if the Outcast's chief had not appeared on a threatening mount.

Toothless growled at the hazy Whispering Death, his ancient enemy. Hiccup gasped when seeing two men riding it. The one in the back threw an accurate knife; it seemed to have hit a string, for there was a snapping sound. Alvin reached with his sword and slashed Ivor across the neck, hitting a vein. Then he opened his mouth to accept the stream of blood that gushed through the air.

Ivor should have flown then, but the stone was falling. He had to retrieve it. He dove, feeling the Outcasts slash his wings. They tried to capture him, but when his claws closed around the stone the bleeding stopped. He flew into the air, feeling death held away by only a mere rune. He got a glimpse of an old man with a glaive on a Nadder, laughing maniacally.

The images faded. The feelings that they had stirred in the cool morning did not.

"Great thunder of Thor," Stoick said, shocked and angry.

"Alvin on a Whispering Death with Savage!" Fishlegs exclaimed. He and Meatlug came up from their hiding place.

The twins looked horrified, which was unusual for them.

"He drank dragon blood!" Ruffnut pointed at the dissipating steam.

"Didn't even ask the dragon for permission!" Tuffnut said.

"More importantly, Alvin's learned to ride dragons," Astrid said in a hard voice.

"But I didn't teach him!" Hiccup whispered; he seemed to be pleading his innocence. "Toothless and I escaped before we could; Mildew helped us-"

His voice trailed off. Mildew. Whom he had taught to bond with a wild Nadder, the one that Gobber now rode. Mildew, the man who had stayed behind on Outcast Island, to help them escape. But no, he couldn't have-

He could have. Ivor had seen him riding with the Outcasts.

His dad voiced the breaking words for Hiccup, the words that shattered the illusion that a man who rides a dragon becomes a better person.

"Maybe Mildew was helping Alvin instead."

3. Chapter Two

****And here is Chapter Two, showing the return of Gris and Toothless meeting her for the first time in ages. It was cathartic to write this, and Hiccup's guilt, after seeing the season finale. ****

"This is my fault," Hiccup repeated. "This is all my fault." He was still scrubbing the dragon's blood from his hair and face. They had taken the prosthetic off his leg so it wouldn't rust.

Nor was he the only one; his father had found a large trough in the Great Hall for cleaning up anyone who had gotten caught in the dragon's blood. Several Vikings had set up a bathing station in a pair of empty stables, mainly for the boy. Several old blankets served as a screen for modesty. The twins had protested, but their dragon had grabbed them by the necks and tossed them into the water. Ruffnut had to climb out anyway. She had glowered at the Zippleback before heading towards the separate screened trough for the girls.

"You've been saying that for hours." Snotlout made a face as Gobber dunked him. He surfaced and blew water out of his nose. "Saying it won't take Alvin off that Whispering Death."

Hiccup sighed. He hated it when Snotlout was right. Toothless used his tail, sans artificial fin, as a brush against his

back.

"Logically speaking, there was nothing else you could have done," Fishlegs said, allowing Meatlug to lick his dirty fingernails. "You were locked in a cell with little chance of escape and given an opportunity to rescue Toothless. Anyone of us would have trusted Mildew if he knew the way to our dragon."

"Hookfang and I wouldn't have gotten captured," Snotlout scoffed. "We wouldn't have gone off on our own in the dead of the night without even leaving a note behind. Especially if we couldn't lift a bludgeon."

"Hello, 'hostile to other dragon species'!" Fishlegs chided him, but Hiccup had already sunk into the water. The red coloring hid more than his naked form and the stone that wouldn't come off his chest.

"Hostile dragons are more fun." Tuffnut grinned. "That's when all the fire happens!"

"To think of MILDEW on a dragon." Gobber gave a dark chuckle, using his hook to remove blood flecks from Snotlout's face. "Promise me one thing, Hiccup; next time I get a chance to clobber that codger, let me do it. For hours on end."

"You'll have to get in line, Gobber," Stoick said, standing with an imperious glare. "Mildew didn't just deceive Hiccup; he could have handed Berk's entire safety to the Outcasts!"

Hiccup surfaced to answer. Toothless curled around him.

"He could have? Dad, he did."

"We still have dragons, and the more experienced riders." Stoick patted his wet shoulder. "It wasn't your fault."

"It was." Snotlout ignored Gobber yanking on his hair and turned to speak. "If he hadn't gone off on his own to the Isle of Night--"

"You could have ALL been captured," Stoick interrupted, "and then it would have been up to Gobber and me to come rescue you. From what we found on the island, Alvin was prepared to take down several dragon riders."

"Not to mention that WE were the ones who gave Hiccup the book," Gobber added. "We just didn't think that ANYONE would tamper with Bork's archives; even someone as traditional as Mildew wouldn't tamper with sacred notes, let alone his personal book."

He gave an angry shudder that shook Snotlout. The smaller boy's teeth rattled.

"Oh. Sorry, Snotlout. Just wanting to smash Mildew's skull in."

Snotlout edged away and started scrubbing himself frantically. Hiccup sunk again, away from his father's warm touch. Cold bubbles escaped his lips.

Despair clogged every one of his limbs, even the missing leg. Yes, Mildew had tricked all of them, tampering with Bork's work minutes before Stoick had presented the box to him in the Great Hall, but as Mildew had pointed out on the Outcast ship, Hiccup had chosen to follow the fake notes. And he had chosen to trust Mildew. Snotlout couldn't have been more right.

He came up for air. Gobber and Stoick had changed the subject.

"Alvin's probably planning to attack with an army. With Norbert's noise-makers they could capture dozens of dragons at a time."

"It's been three months, Gobber. Alvin could have thousands of Nadders and Gronckles waiting to burn Berk to the ground."

"He doesn't," Hiccup said.

They stared, surprised. The stone on Hiccup's chest glowed. His voice was calm, emotionless.

"The brown dragon Ivor found out about the raids, about the mass captures. Ivor knew what it was like to be imprisoned and wanted no other dragon to suffer the same faith. He was busting dragons out of Outcast Islands at the same rate Alvin was shipping them there. That's why they killed him." He looked at his dad. "What is Rainbow Isle?"

"The Isle of the Gods!" Gobber exclaimed. "Where the Bifrost connects Asgard to our humble Viking seas. Craggy mountain island with lots of cliffs. About a week's sail from here and five days' hiking to the top."

"Only the bravest Vikings dare go there," Stoick said. "I went as a lad once. Saw a great black dragon that burned our armor just as we had landed on the beach. Didn't kill us, but we couldn't kill it."

"A black dragon . . ." Hiccup said thoughtfully. Fishlegs caught the expression in his eyes.

"Hiccup, you better stop that thinking." He sounded fierce. "Going there would be a sacrilege-"

"The brown dragon called Toothless his nephew," Hiccup interrupted. "He wanted to deliver a message to his sister who lives on Rainbow Isle. Maybe-"

"You're not going alone." Snotlout hung his arm over the trough. "We've been through this before. You need us, much as you hate to admit it."

"I'm going if it's dangerous," Tuffnut announced. "Maybe Thor will shoot us with lightning!"

"We're going too," Stoick said fiercely. "The dragon gave you a rune stone labeled with 'akdis,' protection. And I've never seen a stone like that on any island."

Hiccup looked down. The stone had what looked like a Y with three

slants instead of two as well as an eye.

"A god gave a present to that dragon." Stoick fingered it. "We can at least try to return it."

"Thank you," Hiccup said. He fingered the white rune and traced its thin lines. Toothless examined the stone with suspicious eyes.

* * *

><p>Jubilation peppered the air on Outcast Island. The bearded thugs celebrated the brown dragon's death with smoky bonfires and barrels of golden ale.<p>

Alvin had restricted himself to one tankard; Savage had taken nothing. Usual on Alvin's part, for he knew what a little alcohol could do to the brain, but unusual for Savage. Although the Outcast smiled with fierce triumph, his eyes reflected no joy.

Eos's prison chamber remained dark. The only guard had let most of the torches die out, and he had nodded his head into sleep. Fumes had wafted from outside, mixing with the stuffy air.

Not that Eos needed the air to breathe, although she shuddered with revulsion at the staleness. Being dead had its advantages. They had tried threatening her with axes and swords, only to find out that the weapons couldn't hurt her. Not with the typical stab wounds and gushing blood. They were breaking up bits of her essence with each jab, and she took longer to reform herself. Once it had taken hours, and the men trembled when thinking she had escaped. If only essence could slip through the pentagram, but no. It had been constructed too well.

Alvin had ordered the men not to slash her after that. If only he hadn't found another weapon. He would visit once every other day, to whisper poisonous words into her ear. Whether they rang truly or falsely she did not know. His mere presence sparked memories of Midgard that she had struggled to suppress in the Underworld, of slaughtering her kin and letting love twist her heart in twain. She didn't want those memories, but he didn't stop talking.

He said the chief and son had grown apart as the son's body had refused to grow, that he had captured her son twice just to torment the father, and that they had stopped slaying dragons and were doomed for destruction. That last fact had brought a smile to Eos's face.

"What are you smiling about?" Alvin had demanded. "They're dishonoring your memory!"

She had stepped towards the back of the pentagram, away from his grip. Her eyes were closed, her voice was calm.

"I hated being a dragon slayer," she had said. "Thor did not know what he had done when he had sent me to Midgard as a mortal woman. That is why I cannot forgive or love him."

Alvin had not understood. She was glad. Few knew that Eos's father had been the Green Death, and that Odin changing her from dragon to maiden had sparked her father's madness and ambition for power. The

humans had not known the dragon lore, and for that she was grateful. It was bad enough that she had been reincarnated as a Midgard woman; no need for them to know that Eos was related to the monster that had terrorized their lives.

No words could convey the helplessness of going through mundane Archipelago motions, of speaking violent rhetoric that went against her core merely because the dragon-slayer body demanded it. No flower could express her bitterness and anger at Thor, who had tried to play the role of Odin. She had internalized the ugly hatred, hidden the feelings with those memories.

If only Alvin would let her forget.

She didn't just close her eyes to shut out the thought of this dank room, to deny the existence of a Midgard family when an Asgard one awaited her. She was concentrating, probing for places to plant seeds. Seeds that would sprout roots, a spider web of roots. The ironwood pentagram had been hammered deeply, but not that deeply. If she could concentrate, long enough . . . Time processed differently for those of Asgard.

These Outcast thugs were stupid, even Alvin. They had created this star-shaped prison on a DIRT floor. She was the goddess of fertility and flowers. They would regret summoning her from the Underworld or threatening Heluth.

At this moment, Alvin was celebrating above with the other ruffians and riffraff of this island. A dragon had died, a large brown one with intelligent eyes, and she prayed that it was not Ivor. Brave Ivor did not deserve to be killed by these monsters who paraded in human guise.

Yet her dragon brother wouldn't have shied from a fight. He would have welcomed it the way rich men welcome dinner guests.

* * *

><p>The stone burned against Hiccup's chest as they encountered the large black dragon. He hadn't been able to remove the object, and Stoick wasn't about to let Gobber perform surgery. Snotlout had offered to try yanking, but the stone had burnt a white line onto his hand that he now showed off as a "holy scar".<p>

It had been a two-day trip by dragon, and they had stopped for the night on a deserted island. Stoick had insisted on setting up watches, and they had left abruptly when the sun rose, as if fearing the shadows that followed. Gobber rode the Nadder they had rescued from Outcast Island, but everyone was on their regular dragons.

They had been wary, remembering what had happened the last time they had made such a trek. Snotlout had made it a point to announce that no Outcast ships were in sight, and the dragons sniffed for hostile creatures. The somber faces didn't ease Hiccup's guilt, but they reminded him and Toothless to keep flying.

Things had seemed so easy when the craggy mountain had come into focus. They'd land where the crystals gleamed in the midday sun, get the stone off his chest, and then they'd deal with the Outcasts and avenge Ivor. That was the plan.

Of course the black dragon would be lingering at the top. Of course it would be a size of a mountain. And of course its tiny wings somehow allowed it to charge at them and screech.

The black dragon's eyes flashed, and a large screech emanated from her rounded jaws. Half the riders covered their ears; the boys didn't have to, since Ivor's blood had soaked them and softened her shouts.

STAY AWAY! FOR GODS ONLY. . .

Her loud voice trailed off when she took in the dragon riders hovering, Fishlegs shying away and Hiccup standing his ground. Her screech died down to a polite apology.

I BEG YOUR PARDON. YOU RIDE DRAGONS?

"We aren't here to mess with the gods," Hiccup said loudly. "We're here to deliver a message to Gris, sister to Ivor."

"Also a message to someone named Mud. Is he a wrestler dragon with big muscles?" Tuffnut said.

I AM GRIS. MUD IS MY NEPHEW. The dragon flapped her tiny, speckled wings, ignoring Tuffnut. She flew closer, but not with the intent to attack. I REMEMBER YOU, BEARDED VIKINGS. YOU WERE SKINNIER AS A LAD.

Stoick grunted. "You burned my favorite ax."

ONCE AGAIN, I BEG YOUR PARDON. ODIN ORDERED ME TO PROTECT RAINBOW ISLE FROM CURIOUS MORTALS. I HAVE TO OBEY.

Toothless's eyes followed Gris with an unfamiliar expression, of befuddlement and recognition. She stopped in front of him, struggling to stay airborne. Her eyes widened, as did her jaws.

IT CAN'T BE.

"What can't be?" Hiccup asked, urging Toothless to back away. She followed.

I HAD A SON ONCE, MY FIRST LIVING SON. HE WAS BORN DEAD, LIKE HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS, BUT THOR REVIVED HIS HEART WITH LIGHTNING. BUT GREEN, NOW CALLED THE GREEN DEATH, TOOK LITTLE FURY FROM ME WHEN THE HATCHLING COULD FLY. I NEVER SAW MY SON AGAIN, FOR I WAS CONFINED TO RAINBOW ISLE.

"That's a sad story," Tuffnut said. "Really tempted to cry now."

Ruffnut reached, but Gobber was the one who tapped Tuffnut across the head.

"Keep quiet. She's not done yet," he said.

Gris kept circling.

ODIN PROPHESED THAT MY LITTLE FURY WOULD BE FREED BY MORTAL HANDS

AND DEFEAT THE GREEN DEATH, BUT I DIDN'T BELIEVE IT. Gris's sorrowful voice gained a quaver. THE MORTALS HAD NO REASON TO LIKE US. YET HERE YOU ARE. IS THAT YOU, FURY?

Hiccup heard a chirp that newborns dragon often made to call their mothers. This chirp was curious and tentative, asking a question.

It came from Toothless. Hiccup's jaw dropped.

The Night Fury made the call again, edging himself and Hiccup closer to the larger dragon. His eyes held hesitation, as if remembering the last time he had called to family and found them false.

Gris pounced on the two of them. Stoick yelled, but it was not a vicious attack. She was wrapping them into a spinning embrace.

The joy in Gris's voice bubbled through the sky as if she were a shaken bottle of champagne. Hiccup felt like he were trapped in the bottle, shaken and stirred across the sky.

FURY! FURY! MY LITTLE NIGHT FURY! YOU'RE ALIVE!

4. Chapter Three

Hiccup had survived an exploding dragon, a lightning bolt to the head, and even several bolas, but nothing prepared him for a reptile mother's aggressive affection. She clutched the Night Fury and boy to her chest, spinning with glee and tossing them into the air as a man would toss a toddler. Hiccup's head spun faster than the rest of his body; he was still strapped to the saddle, and Gris's limbs were like muscular tree trunks wrapped around his chest. He thanked the gods that her long talons didn't claw them.

OH MY FURY, I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD, YOU DON'T KNOW HOW OFTEN I WATCHED THE SKIES AND FEARED THAT YOU HAD PERISHED! I DREAMED SO OFTEN THAT YOU WOULD RETURN, THAT A MORTAL WITH KIND EYES WOULD FIND YOU!

Toothless gave a strangled warble. It sounded like Hiccup's croaking when his father hugged him too strongly.

OH, I'M SORRY! Her umbrella-shaped wings flared out, and she lowered them onto the mountain top. Her limbs opened to release them.

Toothless crawled away and collapsed; Hiccup undid the harness and tested his feet on the rocky ground. Crystals jutted at different places, threatening to trip the two-legged. His head kept wobbling; so did his feet. His hair was flattened at an odd angle.

Gris watched them, apologetic joy lighting up her eyes. She raised her snout to the other surprised riders.

YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO LAND. I'LL CALL MUD TO BRING YOU REFRESHMENTS.

Stoick landed first. Gobber then followed. Thornado trudged to the cliff's edge and let off a blast of sound. His strong hands steadied Hiccup as he stomped around the glittering crystals.

"Dragon doesn't know her own strength," he muttered, checking for bruises and smoothening Hiccup's hair.

"Like some men I knew," Hiccup responded. Stoick didn't rise to the bait. The other teens landed, and their dragons stood at a respectable distance from Gris. Two things danced in each of their scaly faces: suspicion and . . . reverence.

"You look like you got caught in a maelstrom and sent tumbling through a cyclone," Tuffnut said.

"Which is awesome." Ruffnut turned to Gris. "Can you spin my brother and me like that?"

Gris wasn't paying attention. Her large lips pursed, and Hiccup despite the dizziness noted how much she resembled a Gronckle, if Gronckles ever grew to the size of mountains and gained thick scales. Gris gave a small call, a chirping whistle.

Hiccup couldn't speak Dragonese, but she seemed to be saying, "Come here. It's perfectly safe."

Fluttering wings, high-pitched squeaking. Before Toothless could get up, four balls of scales crashed into him. He went down with a croak of defeat.

"Toothless!" Hiccup broke away from his dad and stopped. Four fledgling dragons, each the size of a full-grown boar had landed on Toothless and had started sniffing him. One even licked the sore spots on his wings and nipped at the tail-fin. Toothless shook his tail for futile moments.

THESE ARE YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, Gris said excitedly. AFTER THE GREEN DEATH DIED, I LAID FIVE EGGS WITH LIVING BABIES. MY FIRST BROOD.

"Wow, Baby Night Furies!" Fishlegs exclaimed. "Though I was expecting them to all look the same."

Indeed, each baby had different features from Toothless. Three had rounded snouts like Gris's and one had wicked jaws like that of a Monstrous Nightmare. The one with the jaws was bright red with black spots, while two were wheat-golden with green bumps, and the third was a plain light blue. Only their eyes were the same as Toothless's; bright yellow with black pupils.

Gris gave a short whistle. They bounced off the Night Fury and stood in line: yellow, yellow, blue, red. She started naming them in that order.

GUNHILD, HELGI, ARDIS, and EINAR. WAIT, WHERE'S NEPHIL?

WITH MUD, Ardis responded; her voice belonged to a sarcastic soprano in an opera. THE BABY **ALWAYS** HANGS OUT WITH MUD. She bent to scratch her scales.

ARDIS, BE NICE, Gunhild scolded; she had a deeper warble. NEPHIL IS NOT A BABY.

"Wait, I'm not getting this. They all have Viking names and HE'S called Toothless?" Snotlout pointed at the prone Night Fury.

"Toothless is the name _I _gave him," Hiccup said with annoyance. "Gris and Ivor called him Fury."

ODIN NAMED HIM "NIGHT FURY," Gris said, FOR BEING THE SWIFTEST AND SMARTEST DRAGON. FURY WAS A BABY WITH DESTINY, AND THOSE BABIES ARE ALWAYS GIVEN FANCY NAMES.

"So Toothless is the only Night Fury?" Fishlegs put two hands to his mouth. "It's not a separate species?"

Gris shook her head. Toothless deflated.

"You realize we're going to have to rewrite the Book of Dragons?" Fishlegs looked at Hiccup.

"I do," Hiccup said. Odd feelings swept through him; he had not expected to find Toothless's family on this trip, but he had thought that more Night Furies could give his dragon company. Still, these fledglings seemed nice, and Toothless always had the other Berk dragons.

She turned and pursed her lips again to whistle. Then she gave a call that nearly knocked Stoick and Gobber to the ground and DID knock down the other teens.

MUD! NEPHIL! WE ARE WAITING FOR YOU.

* * *

><p>The figure in the trees grimaced. He had been watching the reunion with binoculars, dangling from a top branch, and his eyes gleamed with suspicion. A small green dragon no longer than his arm hung beside him, tail drooping like a spiked vine. He brushed sweaty brown hair out of his eyes.<p>

Surely Gris wasn't serious about him coming? Not like . . . this? Mum had told him not to show himself to mortals. There were kids with them, and Mud didn't like kids. Not the big and brawny ones that reminded him of-

No. Do not think of the Jotun scum. Stay focused.

The skinny one was different. He was also a brunette, but he spoke with modest authority. Gris had practically hugged him to death and he had survived. And his chest . . . gleamed.

The skinny one had Ivor's rune stone! Mud tightened the focus on the binoculars, a crude contraption made of stone and metal. There it was: the white rune he had painted before tying the string around the large dragon's neck. How had it gotten to that boy? Had Ivor given it to him?

Did the skinny one know why the stone had failed?

Gris called again; the shout knocked Nephil out of the tree. He fluttered to the ground, chirping as he crashed on dead leaves. Falls

did not bother baby dragons when they are learning to fly.

MUD, WE **HAVE** TO.

Mud sighed. He swung off the branch and landed on the ground. Air rushed past him, and he landed. This tree had a hole for storing his things, but the binoculars were a delicate instrument. They had to go with him.

Nephil watched with fascination as Mud stripped quickly and knelt. What occurred made the air rustle.

A brown dragon stretched against the dead leaves, a stripe of rainbow eating at its side. He grunted at Nephil to follow. The little green reptile hopped on Mud's back, and the larger dragon trotted. Giggles erupted against the quiet trees as the binoculars bounced with each bounding step.

* * *

><p>If the dragon riders could see what was happening on the seas, they would not have relaxed so easily. Gris had abandoned her post to welcome her lost son, and Mud was not watching the constant currents. It had to be the day that invaders would arrive.<p>

Outcasts and Hysterics rode the same boat towards Rainbow Isle. A normal ship would have taken a week to arrive, but Norbert had, with Alvin the Treacherous's help, trained a few Gronckles to power a primitive steam-engine. Smoke belched from the masts, and the dragons puffed with rations of nip. The seven-day trip had taken two as a result, and fair winds had supported them.

Savage stood at the stern like a fierce masthead, watching the approaching shore. His hand clenched a small hatchet, and he wore no expression on his face. His boss marched along the bow, talking with the Hysteric chief.

"Do you think your noisemaker will knock out the magnificent beast?" Alvin asked Norbert the Nutjob, who grinned and showed missing teeth.

"It ought to; you saw the amount of dragons it brought down. Why are you so keen on Rainbow Isle anyway?"

"The brown dragon came from there," Alvin said. He was stroking the Whispering Death, which curled under a thick protective tarp. "It may have kin like the black beast. If there are more like it, and they decide to attack . . ."

"Ah. You can't destroy Berk without a dragon army, and the brown one has been a serious setback."

"A setback," Alvin repeated. "And you can't have Stoick's boy unless you succeed in invading Berk."

"I'm surprised you don't want the boy anymore."

Alvin gestured to the Whispering Death. "Oh I'll want him when you've made him a Hysteric, but since you donated your inventions to this endeavor, I thought you should have him."

Norbert was insane, but he was not stupid. He held his axe at the ready.

"There's something valuable on that island, isn't it? Or someone?"

"One or the other," Alvin said, eyes on Savage. "But most certainly valuable to the gods."

Maybe to most of the gods. But one had favored them so that they arrived quickly. One who whispered to the currents and made them push the three-decked ship along. One whose breath scared away the storm clouds and dog that surrounded the island.

One who craved the dragons' destruction. If only Gris had not recognized her son.

5. Chapter Four

Outcast Island was quiet, save for a few guards and Mildew. The former Berk Viking and his sheep had chosen to stay, in case the trip to Rainbow Isle went wrong and the Outcasts needed a smart leader. He had expressed his concern in messing with gods, and Alvin had acknowledged the risk.

"Gods are temperamental beings, especially the violent ones." He had pointed to a cold, flat building that housed an underground chamber. "But we have something they don't: leverage."

Mildew had said nothing. He had given Hiccup and dragon training to the Outcasts with almost drunken glee, but instinct told him to never visit that flat building. There were some boundaries that men should not cross. Fortunately Alvin hadn't forbidden him to enter the building, or he may have sneaked in out of sheer curiosity and found himself beheaded. The few times that curiosity and boredom sparked his interest, Fungus would nip him. Strong loyalty, his sheep had. And Outcast Island remained quiet.

Within the dim chamber, only the sound of faint buzzing came. Eos looked down and grimaced. The faint noise startled the sleeping guard, who shot to his feet. His helmet was askew and showed where the metal had pressed against his hairline.

"What's that?" He pointed his spear at Eos. "What's that witchcraft?"

She rolled her eyes and moved her feet. The rectangle of rainbow was vibrating because she couldn't stand the happy ringtones that emerged from each color.

"Make it stop!"

"I can't touch anything." She indicated with her transparent feet sliding through the rainbow. "Pick it up."

He hesitated.

"I can't hurt you, Boris." The name was distasteful on her tongue

even as she spoke it with reassurance. "It won't hurt you either. Just pick it up and press Talk."

He reached a short arm, the musty laundry dampening his hand. She bent and quickly breathed a few spores into his face. His stupid eyes glazed over.

Having agreed to watch Loki's children was a bad influence; she was more willing to resort to underhanded means now that Alvin was gone. For how long she didn't know.

"It's the rune on the purple stripe," she said with annoyance. "Press it again to put it on Speaker."

Boris did as she said. Eos spoke calmly.

"Hello?"

"Mom, where are you?" Heluth wasn't Eos's daughter, but they treated each other as normal parent and rebellious teenage girl. "When's dinner?"

Eos didn't know how much time had passed, but it must have been a long time if Heluth had noticed her missing. She kept her voice light.

"Sweetheart, dinner's in the brick oven; I can't attend to it now. but can you handle it? Be the mother for today?"

"Where are you?"

"On Midgard, Lulu. Need to do a favor for a few devotees. "

"Mom, I'm not five." Heluth's voice grew petulant. "Don't call me 'Lulu.' Seriously, where are you? You know that I can't leave the Underworld, and you can't because you're dead."

"Soon; some mortals summoned me to save their livestock. How about after dinner you open up that nightclub you were thinking of, for the hardworking spirits that volunteer their time? And you can redecorate your room if I'm late." Eos was trying not to panic as she offered these bribes.

"I thought I couldn't open up that nightclub because it would be a bad influence on the ferryman and was in poor taste."

"Humor me, Lu? I don't know when I'll be back, and I want to make it up to you." That WAS the truth. "I need to go. Talk to you soon. Press End," she commanded Boris.

The Outcast did as she said. He then replaced the rainbow block under the damp sheets, covering it. His eyes remained glazed.

She could probably call for help, probably should while Alvin was away. The thing was, she had called so many times before, begging Odin to withdraw Mud's punishment, or to ask Jarnsaxa to stop her son from bullying her son. Odin had changed her from dragon to Asgardian maiden and started this whole mess, but he had accepted no responsibility. Fate was his excuse, fate and what the Norns had said.

And these devices were so new, that few Vanir used them. The ones that did refused to care about Eos, or couldn't. Heimdall couldn't reach her in this chamber, and Freya's soothing hands could not pull her from Midgard.

She had to rescue herself.

* * *

><p>Twirling her fingers around a coil of dyed white hair, a skinny girl dialed runes on the rainbow phone. Half her face was covered in a gold mask, and the other half was pure bone. Pure white bone, from the forehead to the grinning cheeks. Heluth was in her rebellious stage and refused to cover her "deformity" as the other Asgardian children called it.<p>

She waited minutes for the clandestine, unlisted number to go through. Its owner had given it to her in case of emergency, or in case she wanted a teensy favor that she couldn't get Eos, Mud or her brothers to do. He picked up and said nothing.

"Daddy, it's me," she said, her voice a bored drawl. "I think something happened to Eos; she said I could open a nightclub in the Underworld, and you know how good she is at saying 'no.' Can you see what she's doing on Midgard? And maybe pick up some hair dye?"

There was a chuckle on the other end. Loki laughed often to hide his feelings, but his daughter had him wrapped around her bony fingers. He'd do what she asked and add some good-spirited fun into the mix.

* * *

><p>Suspicion coursed through Astrid when Mud arrived. Although Toothless's cousin, he resembled the Night Fury the most, except he was dirt-brown and about half of Toothless's size. They could all see why he was called Mud.<p>

Clinging to his back was what resembled a dark green Terrible Terror, if Terrible Terrors had pointed snouts. He tumbled off when Mud halted, and the green dragon rolled to a stop in front of the four baby dragons.

THERE YOU ARE! Gris greeted them. MUD, WHY ARE YOU IN THIS-

Mud hissed at her, and Gris seemed to remember something. She buttoned up.

OH RIGHT. MOTHER'S ORDERS. SHE WORRIES TOO MUCH, YOU KNOW.

Mud's eyes, which were green with black pupils, narrowed the way Toothless's did when facing threatening enemies. Gris backed off.

HI, **BABY**, Ardis greeted the little emerald dragon. ABOUT TIME YOU SHOWED UP.

I'M NOT A BABY! The green dragon responded. He stood on his hind legs and bowed to the group. ARE YOU MORTALS? I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE SO

BIG.

THEY'RE NOT BIG, NEPHIL. Einar couldn't resist. His black spots wiggled. YOU'RE JUST A MIDGET OF A DRAGON.

Nephil squeaked in indignation and pounced on his brother. The two wrestled, but Einar soon had the smaller dragon pinned to the ground. Mud snapped at them, and they broke off. Nephil still snapped at the red dragon but did not fire.

Hiccup approached Mud, careful not to make eye contact. A thin hand extended towards the pointed snout.

"The brown dragon Ivor had a message for you." He turned away "He said 'it wasn't your fault'. Whatever 'it' was."

Mud closed his eyes and moved his head forward. It was a light bump, to show that he trusted the boy. Hiccup smiled, only to look in surprise as the dragon peered at his chest. The stone poked through his tunic, gleaming. Mud touched it with his nose.

"Ivor gave it to me," Hiccup said. "Was he your father?"

Mud backed away and shook his head. His expression darkened. Hiccup felt perplexed. So did Astrid. That's when she noticed the binoculars dangling from his neck. Fishlegs did too, and his eyes widened.

MUD'S FATHER IS NOT ONE OF US, Gris said, and she looked serious for the first time. MUD, DO YOU THINK OUR GUESTS WOULD LIKE TEA?

"Tea?" Snotlout asked. "How can dragons have tea? Don't you need hands for that?"

Astrid whacked him, but Gris answered without missing a beat.

I OFTEN HAVE TEA WITH HEIMDALL WHEN HE VISITS; HE LIKES EARL GREY WITH FREYA'S LEMONS.

"You've seen Heimdall? The guardian of the Bifrost?" Stoick asked with amazement.

MANY TIMES. HE'S A GOOD FRIEND. THIS WAY; THERE IS A CAVE HE FASHIONED FOR US. Gris gestured for them to follow. Mud took up the lead, trotting stiffly. The green dragon was quick to catch up, and they marched closely. Hiccup walked with the other fledglings, and the other teens took up the lead.

Astrid hung back with Fishlegs; they watched Snotlout race the twins and attempt to walk proudly. The cave opened to them like the Green Death's massive jaws, and the crystals in the ground jutted out like long, blocky teeth.

"Dragons, especially Night Furies, have good eyesight," Fishlegs said. "And you noticed he's not using his wings, even though they're fully developed? No injured tail-fin either."

"Also the way he walked," Astrid said. "It's like he's not used to bounding on four legs."

"So why would a healthy Night Fury not fly and have binoculars around his neck?" Fishlegs mused.

"Something fishy is going on here." Astrid looked at the cave. "We could be walking into a trap."

"If Gris wanted to kill us, she could have when we were in the air. She was like a smaller version of the Green Death, only without the right kind of wings." Fishlegs indicated with the side of his head. "No blind spot, large nose and ears for scent and hearing. Also probably not fireproof on the inside. If something happens, we'll be ready. We always are."

That's what Fishlegs said. Once in the cave, however- a large chamber with glowing rocks stuck in regular intervals in the wall- Gunhild latched her sun-yellow body to him, asking about the book he carried in his hands. She was a heavy baby, and Fishlegs had his hands full. So did Hiccup; the other yellow dragon, Helgi, was nibbling at his prosthetic and tasting it. Gris had to bark to make Helgi stop. Einar studied Toothless's saddle with piercing eyes and asked questions, while Ardis preened in front of Snotlout.

DO YOU THINK I AM A PRETTY DRAGON? she asked him, showing off her blue scales and fan-like tail.

"Oh yes, very pretty," Snotlout said uneasily; he seemed to remember what had happened the last time a dragon had taken a shine to him. Hookfang eyed Ardis as he would eye a dead leaf.

Nephil stayed by Mud's side as the brown dragon assisted Gris with making tea. They chattered low voices; or rather, Nephil chatted and Mud nodded. Eventually Gobber joined them when seeing the tea things clatter and tumble.

"You really need hands to do this right," he said cheerily, taking a kettle and hanging it from his hook.

I USUALLY HAVE THEM, she responded. Mud gave her a dark glare.

Although solid stone, someone had taken the time to carve the walls so that the cave resembled a mead hall. That same person had painted black images of glorious battles, nude men bathing in hot springs, and a large egg hatching in front of a warrior with a hammer. Toothless stared with fascination at the last image, as if trying to remember that scene. Hiccup also stared, sometimes stopping to copy the pictures.

Gris waddled through the cave until they found a chamber with adequate benches. They sat, and the babies latched on to them. Her long claws dangled with kettles, baskets of raw chicken legs, and metal cups; Stoick rushed to help her and Gobber. While the kettle brewed over a white-hot stone, she told them that the first crystals on Rainbow Isle had grown around Toothless's egg, which had swirled with many colors.

MY LITTLE FURY WAS ONLY THIS BIG. She indicated with her wings. AND WHEN HE HATCHED, THE SHELL PIECES FLEW IN ALL DIRECTIONS. THE CRYSTALS GREW AROUND EACH SHARP SHARD, AND HEIMDALL SAID THEY WERE FITTING COLORS FOR THE ISLE OF THE BIFROST.

Toothless looked down in embarrassment. Mud rolled his eyes, as if he had heard this story before. Most dragons would simply lie down with boredom, like the babies did. The rainbow stripe lining Mud's left side attracted her eye. She studied it. Smooth, not scaly, and glittering like the crystals.

"There's something I don't get," Fishlegs said. He was stroking Gunhild, and Meatlug licked the baby's clawed feet. "You talk, and your children talk except for Toothless. And I've never heard our dragons speak. Why is that?"

OH. Gris looked as if the answer should be obvious. ALL THE DRAGONS ENTHRALLED BY THE GREEN DEATH LOST THEIR ABILITY TO SPEAK, EVEN MY FURY. MY BROTHER IVOR CARRIED ME AWAY BEFORE GREEN COULD ENTRAP US. SINCE THE BABIES WERE BORN AFTER GREEN DIED, THEY SPEAK VERY WELL.

Her voice trailed off. Toothless was lying beside her, letting her large tongue sweep over him and the saddle. He seemed relieved that his brothers and sisters weren't bothering him.

Mud grabbed a basket of chicken from Gris's front claws and brought it to Astrid. He dropped it front of her. Stormfly came to investigate. She immediately dug her head into the basket. Astrid scowled.

"How did you know she likes chicken?" she asked the brown dragon.

He gave her an innocent look and trudged away. Her suspicion intensified as he vanished into the back of the cave.

She looked at the others. Stoick and Gobber were helping to pour the tea and squeeze the lemons. Hiccup was talking to red Einar and yellow Helgi at the same time; they wanted to hear about him fighting the Green Death. Ardis had wrapped herself around Snotlout's neck like a coil of scaly sky. Fishlegs was listening to Gris, still holding Gunhild, and the twins had started tussling out of boredom. Stormfly was busy eating chicken. Thornado, Barf and Belch, and Gobber's Nadder were taking a nap, ignoring the chaos.

So, even though it violated the basic rules of hospitality, Astrid slipped past Viking and dragons alike to follow Mud and Nephil down the chamber. She took her axe, careful to keep her footsteps light.

If this were a trap, then at least she would find out first.

The Hysterics and Outcasts had moored just off the beach, not close enough to alert the crystals that jutted from the sand, or the black rock that had STAY AWAY. GODS ONLY carved on it in large runes. It was sunset now, and the Whispering Death could crawl out of its tarp. It sighed with pleasure as Alvin stroked him.

Savage went first. He spread his thin arms, made a magnificent swan dive and swam for the shore. Stealing away past the large stone and into the deep woods just past the dunes, Savage did not look back. The crystals did not even acknowledge him, and the beach did not record his footprints. Alvin waited a few moments.

"You know the plan," He told Norbert, putting on a horned helmet fitted with goggles. "Then the black dragon will be yours."

Norbert nodded. His left eyeball twitched, and he stroked his double-headed axe. His sailors stood with the noisemakers, ready to start screaming.

Alvin swung a leg over the Whispering Death. "Time to go, Woedin."

"So you've given your spiky beast a name."

"He's named for Odin, and for the woe he will cause." Alvin grinned. The dragon gave a hiss in agreement as they took off for the beach. The rainbow crystals did not have time to glitter as he landed near the first. He reached out hairy hands.

Slowly, they stopped glowing. The colors flowed into Alvin's hands, and he grinned. He worked with care on the crystals, so that they glowed with a fixed set of hues. Woedin hissed with approval and apprehension. Only then did they burrow into the sand and vanish.

After all, he hadn't wanted to silence the alarms completely. Only tamper the images they would present.

6. Chapter Five

The shadows hid Astrid's figure as she watched Mud and Nephil trudge into a second opening in the cave. Their bulky figures crashed through the brush and vanished into the woods; the closer she got, the faster Mud seemed to trudge. He knocked away branches and let them crack into splinters, leaving a clear path. His heavy footprints were prominent on the ground.

Something was off; if Mud wanted to get away, he could fly easily and use the cover of the trees. Why wasn't he using those Night Fury wings?

She was also getting farther from the others; if something happened, she'd be alone. The grip on her axe tightened. She thanked the darkening woods and the shadows in which she stepped. The only bad thing was that she couldn't see treacherous twigs or loose pebbles that could give her away.

Sweat ran past her bangs. She shifted her axe to one hand to wipe them. That gesture gave her way.

STAY BACK! The little green dragon leaped on the ground and hissed at her. The air from behind ruffled his scales.

Astrid almost laughed. Nephil had the same size and personality as a Terrible Terror, and he posed just as much as a threat. Her laugh made the dragon spit white pellets of fire. She jumped back. Gods, he had nearly scorched her boots.

"It's all right, Nephil," a high-pitched voice called out from the cover of the trees. "I know she's there. Keep her busy until I'm decent?"

Nephil barked back in agreement. He paced from side to side, giving her a glare as the air rustled. Astrid's bangs danced against her sweaty face, and she backed away.

HAVEN'T YOU HEARD THAT CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT?

"I would have, if I knew what a cat was," Astrid remarked.

ARE YOU GOING TO HURT MUD WITH THAT AXE?

"Not unless he tries to hurt me, or Hiccup."

"Lass, if I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't have waited to scorch you." A boy two heads shorter than her strolled out of the trees, buttoning a thin, bark-colored vest. He spoke with a thick, ancient brogue. "I would have told Gris that you weren't trustworthy and she would have done the whole 'baked mortal' bit."

She stared at the boy, at his pink, leathery skin, berry-sized freckles and mess of brown hair. His vest barely covered his stout torso, and his trousers cut off just above the ankle. He wore no boots to cover his toes. A rainbow-colored sword hung from a thin cord that served as a belt. Gods, he was tiny.

"Where's the brown dragon? And who are you?"

"I'm Mud, and I was the dragon." The boy indicated with the binoculars around his neck. "Just can't hold that scaly form for long, so I had to change back when I lost my concentration."

"That's ridiculous," Astrid said. "I've never heard of any being, god or demon, who could or would willingly change into a dragon." Yet she saw the binoculars and the same, distrusting green eyes.

"'When you have eliminated all but the impossible, anything that remains, however improbable it may seem, must be true,'" Mud recited. "Sherlock Holmes."

Astrid gave him a blank look. "What?"

"Sorry." Mud winced. "Wee bit after your time, lass. Seven centuries, actually. What I mean to say is, you don't see a brown dragon with a bucket of chicken, and I have the dragon's eyes and binoculars. Not hard to believe in metamorphosis, even if I'm not Loki, so you must believe that a sixty-pound dragon can change into a sixty-pound boy. I'm guessing these aggies are what gave me away." He lifted the binoculars.

"That," she said, still uncomprehending. "Also, the dragon wasn't flying when it could."

He winced again. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to learn. What's your name, lass?"

"Astrid."

He offered a dirt and wood-smeared hand. She took it, and they shook.

"Pleasure to meet you."

She didn't respond. He picked up Nephil, stroked the little dragon's head, and indicated that she should follow.

"Keep your axe. It'll make you feel safer," he said. Astrid felt as if he were humoring her. Yet, seeing the sword dangling beneath confident hands, she didn't want to argue. She had built her own pyre and had to lie in its smoldering ashes.

But Mud didn't want to kill her. He seemed more relaxed now that she had appeared, less stiff and hostile. Maybe it was the fact that they were suspicious of each other that made him calmer. Dragons often saw themselves in their riders; maybe dragon-boys did the same.

They walked. Astrid didn't let go of her axe, and Mud didn't let go of Nephil. The woods opened up to a river, and they walked alongside it. The roar was soft and allowed them to talk.

"I'm glad it was you that found me," Mud said. "It means I didn't break my promise to Mum, though she is going to lop my ears off with her bread knife. Mum told me to never show my form to mortals, but she didn't say anything about those who followed. Also, you're smarter than the others."

"I am?" she asked flatly. Flattery wasn't going to win her over.

"The skinny one with Fury is too trusting. I could have bitten his hand off if I were in a bad mood. But you, Astrid," he looked up at her with big green eyes, "you were suspicious. That makes you smarter than he is."

"I wouldn't say smarter," she said cautiously. "It's just that we've been betrayed before--"

"Ah. Negative association, classical conditioning. Classic psychology." Mud shook his head. "Though it's not classic yet, given it's not the mid-1900s."

"What are you talking about?"

Mud sighed and talked slowly, as if he were a teacher. "Sometimes in the future, assuming fate doesn't get unraveled, a scientist named Pavlov will test the theory of classical conditioning. He gets a bunch of dogs- domesticated wolves- and rings a bell every time food is served. In time the wee mutts' little mouths water every time they hear the bell- they associate the sound with food." Mud gestured at his own mouth.

Astrid didn't understand a word of this. Nephil yawned.

"When you have a certain experience, it marks you. You associate things, like your skinny friend's ability to trust easily, with betrayal. That's why you take caution when meeting new people and seeing skinny one offering friendship." He slowed down by the river. "But one thing: when following someone, don't wear heavy boots."

"I've worn them before when sneaking around," she said with

annoyance. "No one's heard me."

"I did," he pointed out. "Most dragons would as well. Our kin has sharp hearing."

Astrid had to acknowledge that fact; she had never been able to sneak up on a dragon.

His callused feet were bare, and she heard them make no noise. They collected moist soil as he knelt by a wet, flat boulder. Three stones lay on them, marked with identical runes. The water ran over them, but a string tied to the boulder held them in place. Mud cupped them with one hand, tracing the runes. Nephil also examined them with narrowed eyes.

Another sound entered the air, familiar and unwelcome, but Astrid couldn't place it. She had too many questions.

"So are you a dragon then?" she asked.

"Not all the time, and definitely not most of the time. Only when I'm with Gris. Needs concentration, and I often focus in the middle." He shrugged. "That's why I can't fly. Mum couldn't either, when she was a dragon."

"Then . . ." she tried to wrap her mind around this. "What are you?"

"A boy," he answered simply, letting go of the stones. "Someone of no importance."

There was a low chuckle behind them. Mud and Astrid whirled around. The unsettling sound got louder.

"Your face always scrunches up and turns red when you lie," a familiar Outcast said, stepping out by the river. Sprays of water made his mustache glisten.

Astrid felt her muscles tighten. "Savage."

"You know this man?" Mud asked this with accusation.

"Unfortunately," Astrid responded. They both drew their weapons. Nephil dropped to the ground and hissed, ready to fire.

She heard the unsettling sound again and this time she recognized it. The top of her stomach dropped.

"Mud-"

"You helped kill Ivor," Mud accused Savage. "His death lingers on you."

The low chuckle. Savage came forward with his own blade, which had a wicked curve. There was something different about him, something colder and older. Astrid had never seen him so calm.

"So much love for a violent dragon."

"He was my uncle." Mud lifted his rainbow blade. The colors danced against the evening. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't avenge him."

The ground under them shook. Nephil put his head to the ground. His voice became unsteady.

MUD . . .

"A Whispering Death-" Astrid started, but Savage interrupted with a hand sweep. Three yelps hit the air as the earth came up and wrapped around the trio's legs. The dirt hardened into rock, immobilizing them. Another shot of rock knocked the sword out of Mud's hands. Savage tsked. The sound came closer.

"Naughty naughty, forgetting your vow to my mother and father, _changeling_."

Mud's eyes widened; he recognized the taunts. Then the ground swallowed him, and he shrieked. The sword fell with him, a last glitter of swirling hues.

Astrid and Nephil were still trapped above ground, poor Nephil resembling a black ball of oil as the rock crushed his delicate insides. Savage approached them, sword at the ready.

* * *

><p>The crystals had told Gris about the fleet docking off the shore of Rainbow Isle; she was surprised that they hadn't tried to land ships, but that didn't matter. Men testing their luck on the Isle of the Gods didn't bring fleets filled with large weapons. She had to do her job and guard the island.<p>

She told the babies the perfunctory farewell: if she didn't come back, use the crystals to evacuate, because Gris would fall with Rainbow Isle if the mortals overcame her and the babies couldn't come to Asgard or Valhalla before their time. Her little Fury and the humans were surprised to hear this, and she had to repeat it to them. They seemed surprised that anyone as motherly as her could annihilate.

IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME, FURY, WILL YOU TAKE CARE OF YOUR FAMILY? She asked her eldest son. His eyes became big, considering the implications. Then he looked at the babies, who gave him imploring gazes.

WILL YOU TEACH US TO FLY? Ardis asked.

WILL YOU TELL US STORIES ABOUT FLYING WITH HUMANS? Einar chipped in.

DON'T FORGET MONSTER TALES! Helgi reminded him.

Gunhild gave Fury a piercing look. WILL YOU MAKE EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?

Fury bent his head and nodded. They scrambled around him and nuzzled. Gris gave her son one last rib-crunching nuzzle, and took off for the cave.

IF I'M NOT BACK, MY BABIES WILL KNOW WHAT DO! she called over her shoulders. The mortals covered their ears, and Fury gave a terrified look.

Her small wings gave her a short time to fly, but she stayed low and trudged through the woods. They never saw her coming because she resembled another mountain. Another moving mountain. For a large beast, her steps were quiet. She soon saw the beach. The fleet waited.

Her large maw opened, and storm-clouds of flame burst at the ships, burning them and their funny devices. Curses and shrieks of terror filled the air, as well as surprised yells. Usually Gris left the ships intact, so they could escape; she had changed her tactics because you could not hiss at an army to stay away. They had been planning to invade. Heimdall agreed with her; she heard the orders to "annihilate" through the quivering crystals.

Gris couldn't help but laugh as the humans ran and scrambled on their decks. Their funny machines belched and squeaked in protest, and horrid smells emerged from the wreckage. So this was what her father felt in the depths of madness, sending the other dragons out to steal food and then attacking the mortals who found his island. She was his daughter truly.

Then it came: the army of Nadders and Gronckles with more funny curved machines, roaring into them. Their riders had cruel faces, covered with metal and brandishing swords. She had to fly then, and expose her thin wings.

When she flew to confront them, the men and dragons shouted into their curved instruments. The noise confused her, even as she fired on her kin. Her head spun, as did her vision. She MISSED, for Thor's sake, missed with her boulder-sized flames. Several fell, but ten more took each fallen dragon's place.

FORGIVE ME! she cried, the joy dying with the flames on the smoldering ships. I DID NOT MEAN TO BECOME MY FATHER!

She saw more warships on the horizon, a new fleet with more funny devices. The crystals hadn't told her about a back-up army! This was only the first wave! Gods, she wasn't prepared!

A more terrifying sound than the magnified dragon screeches shot through the air: Nephil's scream, and then Mud's. It made her realize what had happened just as the Gronckles fired into her thin wings, pierced holes that mixed with her ringing head and brought her crashing onto the beach. It had been a ruse, a distraction while the riders invaded the island. They were after her kin!

They lashed her down with thick ropes, making her howl in pain. The men laughed and kicked at her. She did not feel the pain, only the fear for her flightless fledglings and nephew and the sense of failure as she heard the dragons swoop up the mountain.

HEIMDALL! RESCUE MY BABY! RESCUE THE GOOD MORTALS AND MY FAMILY!

* * *

><p>Mud was used to the dark; those who lived in the Underworld had to make their own light and endure the cold. He was not used to curved spines pinning him to the ground or solid rock that glued his legs together. Nor was he used to a spine-covered dragon standing over him with a rider. Goggles made the bearded rider's eyes seem mechanical, inhuman. He smelled of death, of Ivor's death. Gods, the rider had drunk dragon blood.<p>

"Big surprises always come in little packages." The man reached down. "I name you-"

"Harmful!" Mud screamed at the top of his lungs; his faithful sword shot through the tunnel and gleamed white. All the colors of the rainbow, combined into one unified beam.

The man's dragon, a Whispering Death, shrieked and writhed. It didn't like the blinding, reflecting light. Its rider tried to calm the beast, but the distraction gave the smaller boy the advantage.

Mud whispered a spell, and the spines and earth fell away as if they were dust. Scrambling to his feet, Mud stretched out a small hand to catch Harmful. The sword's handle spread warmth through his arm.

He turned and sprinted at the Whispering Death, cringing at what he was about to do. Mud never told anyone that he was squeamish about blood, or about killing his kin.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," he gasped to the beast he slashed at it, first severing its tail and then its head. Heimdall had taught him how to fence, Uncle Loki how to fight dirty. The Norns had also encouraged Loki's way of combat and recommended Orson Scott Card, a fiction writer from the 20th century, for Mud to read late in the Asgard evenings.

Never show mercy. Fight to win, not for honor.

This wasn't honorable, killing a dragon while it was half-blinded, but Mud had no choice. The Whispering Death's mind was focused solely on vengeance and obeying its rider. There wasn't time to reason with it, and he did not sense good thoughts from the blood-drinking master. Mud retched and struck, sobbing apologies. The dragon's jerking corpse forced the bearded man off, distracting him.

From above, Nephil was shouting insults at the other Outcast. Then the screaming insults became pure screams. That was all the excuse Mud needed; he did not want to spill more blood in these tunnels.

"Nephil, hang on!" he called. "I'm coming for you!" He scanned the tunnel that the Whispering Death had made and started sprinting, searching for another opening. If only the bearded man hadn't recovered so quickly.

Mud made it five paces before something heavy swung around his legs. Mud grunted in pain as his knees hit the hard dirt. He brandished his sword to cut the bindings, although they were tight and distasteful to the eyes.

"A bola?" he cried. "Are you bloody kidding me?"

The bearded man had caught up, was coming closer. Mud struggled to a sitting position and wielded his sword. Harmful's light shone out again, concentrated into a pure, blistering beam that would blind any man, as if he looked directly into the sun as it rose and set in a day. Mud then set to work muttering a spell to unbind the ropes.

The beam did not bother the bearded man. In fact, he caught the light so that it entered his palms. A knowing smile danced across his face.

"Oh gods," Mud whispered. The "stones" that made up the bola were actually iron wood, the only material that could restrain a man of Asgard, and they were impervious to magic. The sword dimmed as its light was drained. If he broke the connection-

The bearded man made a fist. Harmful flew out of Mud's hands, out of reach.

Mud tried to scramble back, but the bearded man came too quickly. He grabbed Mud by the shoulders and brought him close. A hand pressed against the boy's mouth and nose.

"Should've killed me while you had the chance, Modi, son of Thor, child of Fire and Thunder. Never ignore Alvin the Treacherous."

White-hot energy flowed from Mud into the larger man's hands, Vanir magic. He screamed not in pain, for it was not pain but the absence of essence, of him, that made him panic. The hand against his mouth made the screams come out as squeaks as a thick elbow pressed into his chest. He was losing air but couldn't stop screaming.

Mud had heard the tale of how the Green Death had absorbed Odin's magic, sunk long fangs into the wise god's neck, but he had never pictured himself in the same position, especially not on Rainbow Isle. He realized that the dimmed crystals jutting into the tunnel had also been drained, meaning Heimdall couldn't reach him there.

Let's give the boy some credit: Mud fought for all it was worth, but he was only sixty pounds as he had told Astrid, and his Vanir strength was fading with his Vanir essence. Soon his mortal side- and dragon blood- would remain, and he was a weak runt by mortal standards.

Sweet Odin, I'm going to die! He cried against the stifling hand. I won't even be in the Underworld; my soul's going to get devoured like Ivor's was. Stop it, please stop it!

The Outcast that Astrid had called Savage dropped into the tunnel. He was holding Nephil, had immobilized the fledgling in stone; the dragon's screams were growing fainter.

Magni! Mud tried to call. Help me! Tell him to stop!

The Outcast stared blankly at him, with cruel indifference. Mud had once seen that expression before, and the indifference had nearly exiled Mud. Now the Outcast smiled, seeing his younger brother helpless. The tunnel's darkness grew.

7. Chapter Six

In Asgard, a stiff figure stood by the Bifrost. His keen eyes caught what was happening on Midgard. His bearded chin quivered with anger. He gave the rarely spoken order, which would echo through the crystals on Rainbow Isle in a booming voice.

"Annihilate."

He realized at the same time that Gris did that the crystals had been tampered with, given false images of the invaders. What arrogance these mortals had, to take down the guardian of Rainbow Isle! He heard her plea to him, to rescue her children from the invaders, and to help the mortals whom had found her lost son. There were other mortals on the island, including the one who had killed the Green Death, but they had brought back her Fury, the unholy offspring of Lightning and Death.

Heimdall had his orders, however; he had to rescue Gris first, and then Modi. The mortals could wait. He had told the boy to stop calling himself Mud, because he was more than mud, but the boy had pointed out that mud was soil and water, both essential for life.

"Besides, my mother's the goddess of fertility," Modi had said with a nervous toss of his head. "Only fitting that I should have a name related to the bonny earth. Besides, everyone says a scrawny runt shouldn't hold a name with destiny."

Such words made Heimdall grind his yellow teeth. If he weren't compelled to watch the Bifrost with his unblinking eyes, he would have challenged Thor to a duel and forced him to accept the boy, treat him as his Vanir son. The boy wasn't perfect, and he had a nasty temper, but he was a boy. He needed a father, one who defended his good name.

Saving Gris was as easy as scratching his beard. He merely had to extend a wrinkled hand into the Bifrost and send the rainbows after her. They coiled around her struggling figure and encased her in light. The armed mortals cried in astonishment, even as they tried to hold her in place.

Heimdall saw the gaping holes in her wings, the pain and fear in her pleading eyes. She'd need more than his friendship. She needed Freya, a spectacular healer and friend of the dragons.

He switched his focus to Modi, to try to find the boy. It should have been easy: use the crystals to pinpoint his location- a primitive form of security cameras for the Vanir- then use the Bifrost to bring him to Asgard. Modi's punishment had long been lifted, so he didn't have to return to the Underworld immediately.

That's when the Rainbow Isle crystals failed. Half of them turned black, black as Heimdall's cloak for sleeping. He had sucked in his breath and switched from crystal to crystal, from the ones had had last shown Eos's son. The gleams became more frantic, as he realized what had happened.

The invaders were after Modi!

* * *

><p>Astrid tugged at her feet. Solid rock and her axe blade would only make small chips, getting blunted in the process. She could feel her skin turning blue.<p>

Savage paused to pick up the stones that Mud had left on the boulder. He crushed them with one fist clenched. Nephil twisted his trapped body and gasped for air, attempting to draw a deep breath at the approaching Outcast.

"Fortunately, Astrid, you're worth more alive than dead. Alvin has a score to settle with you," Savage said casually. He seemed to remember their last encounter, when she had dyed her hair black to impersonate Heather.

She held her weapon at the ready. She was a Viking, and she'd go down fighting, even if she couldn't move to dodge the attacks.

ONLY ONE JERK CALLED MUD 'CHANGELING', Nephil interrupted. I NAME YOU, MAGNI, SON OF THOR AND JARNSAXA! I NAME YOU, JOTUN HALF-BREED!

Savage shivered, and his expression changed.

The son of Thor! Astrid shivered. She kept her grip on her axe and hesitated.

"That doesn't work when I possess a mortal," Savage said. "My essence won't drain if you say my name. And I'm not a half-breed."

"That's not possible," Astrid said. "You think the son of Thor would possess a more attractive vessel."

Nephil groaned. Savage looked fierce, which was normal for him.

"I'm going to enjoy seeing you suffer, Astrid. Maybe we should cripple one of those legs."

He raised his hand. The rocks trapping Astrid, tightened. Her axe cracked against them, but they did not give. Her skin started to lose feeling.

VODR! Nephil gasped; it seemed to be a spell. The rainbow crystals around them lit up. TAKE ASTRID TO SAFETY, AND EVACUATE!

Colors swirled from the crystals and shot at her. She cried out, felt her axe fall and Savage roar in anger . . .

"Astrid, how did you get there?"

She was back in the cave, legs covered in crumbled rock and shaking. The crystals in the walls were now glittering with warning. EVACUATE! EVACUATE! They cried. INVASION!

"Astrid?" Hiccup spoke again, reaching to her. "Are you all right?"

"It's Mud," she finally said, her voice breaking.

The four dragon babies shot up to look into her eyes.

WHERE IS HE? AND NEPHIL? Gunhild asked.

Astrid pointed down the tunnel.

"He's . . . they're in trouble. Outcasts-"

The dragons wasted no time. Einar, Ardis and Helgi sprinted on their squat legs down the tunnel, while Gunhild retreated to snag a crystal from the wall.

"Where are they going?" Hiccup asked.

TO RESCUE MUD AND NEPHIL, Gunhild said, as if it were obvious. IT SEEMS WE HAVE INVADERS.

"But they're only babies!" Astrid cried out. "They won't stand a chance against-"

"Against what, Astrid?" Hiccup was holding her. "Are you all right?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "The little dragon; he saved me, but he didn't save himself. He's trapped, Savage isn't Savage, and I dropped my axe!" She would have buried her face into Hiccup's arms, except it wasn't warrior-like to break down into tears. The others were coming, Stoick looking concerned, so she had to remain calm.

"Astrid, breathe," he said. "What happened?"

"Everything's all right as long as I'm here," Snotlout boasted.

Gunhild jabbed the crystal against Hiccup. It was long and tapered at the end, like an icicle.

TAKE THIS. HEIMDALL HAS ORDERS FOR YOU, she said. FURY SWORE HE WOULD TAKE CARE OF US. NOW HE MUST ABIDE BY THAT PROMISE. SO MUST YOU, DRAGON RIDER.

Hiccup took the crystal. He listened to the vibrations that came from it. So did Toothless.

"Let's go, bud."

"Hiccup-"

"Where are you going?" Stoick cried out. Gobber noticed how Astrid was shaking, as if she were still trapped in the rock.

Hiccup strapped in and flew off on his dragon, just as Stoick shouted at them to stop. Astrid tried to call out to him, to warn him. But the cave shook, and she couldn't say a word.

HE'LL BE ALL RIGHT; Gunhild was dragging a large basket. It was filled with another block of rainbow, several outfits, a small potted tree, and tea things. HE'S RIDING ON MY BIG BROTHER, THE SWIFTEST AND SMARTEST DRAGON.

That's all good and true, Astrid wanted to say, _but they're going to fight a god. Who's good at killing dragons. _

* * *

><p>Hiccup soared swiftly with Toothless, leaving his shouting friends and family behind. One hand clutched the crystal, the other Toothless. He couldn't have stopped if he had wanted to; when a god ordered you to do something, you did it.<p>

It was evening, but Toothless had caught a scent that made him growl, and the rainbow crystal gleamed like a white torch. The Night Fury put on speed and passed over the babies as they sprinted. All three stopped to watch.

GLORIOUS FLYING! Einar praised him.

AMAZING! Helgi said.

DON'T MAKE ME JEALOUS! Ardis warned them, leading her brothers. She had also caught the awful scent, judging by the panicked look in her eyes.

They followed the path that Mud had left, saw the hole by the river, and dove into it. Hiccup then smelt it too: blood. Lots of blood. He caught a glimpse of Astrid's axe as Toothless landed on moist soil. That was when they paused. A familiar, horrible sight caught their eyes.

Toothless growled and got ready to pounce. Hiccup saw it with the crystal's white light. The Whispering Death, cut into prickly pieces. Beheaded, without its tail. Its eyes were still open, watering from disbelief. Its jaw still turned with several dozen sets of sharp teeth.

Thoughts turned in Hiccup's mind at the same rate as the teeth did. Alvin had ridden this dragon, Toothless's rival, in Ivor's recollections. And no sign of Alvin, Nephil or Mud. There had been a struggle, though, given the amount of footprints and dragging marks. Three sets of human footprints and one were smaller than the other. Peculiar.

They turned towards the dark tunnel. Toothless let off a screech that made Hiccup cover his ears, and then he took off again. Hiccup nearly dropped the crystal and would have done so if Heimdall's voice hadn't come from it.

BE CAREFUL! YOU SERVE AS MY ONLY PAIR OF EYES DOWN HERE.

"That's good to know," Hiccup panted, "because I'm completely blind except for your glowing icicle."

NO SARCASM! The voice boomed. THIS IS A MATTER OF LIFE AND FATE!

"Don't you mean life and death?"

I MEAN WHAT I SAY.

Hiccup got worried as the tunnel sloped downward. For all he knew, they could be heading deeper into the mountain. If they hit a volcanic vein-

What they heard echoing through the tunnels was worse than the splash of lava. A baby dragon's injured whimpers, a young boy pleading, and his accented voice faint. Savage interrogating him. Toothless flapped harder.

"I'm not telling you anything unless you let him go," the boy was sobbing. "Please. He's dying."

Daylight at the end of the tunnel, armored figures. They raised crossbows and spears. Child's play. Toothless let off plasma blasts that knocked them down.

Hiccup stopped to study their unfamiliar garb. Chain-mail fashioned from dragon scales. A crest that pricked at his memory. The limp men groaned.

"Fine." There was hiss, a gasp as the baby dragon started to breathe. "Now who has your uncle's rune stone?"

"I don't know his name." The sobs became defiant. "He's probably miles away from here, since the island's bound to collapse."

There was a punch, and a grunt as flesh hit the ground. Hiccup and Toothless jumped, as if they were the ones hit.

"He was on the island, and it's a he. I'd expect so little information from a runt like you, Father's greatest failure."

Hiccup's lip curled. He leaned over Toothless, clutching the crystal as if it were a spear. The rune stone clinging to Hiccup's chest throbbed, as if it pulsed with anger.

"At least I'm not a traitor-ugh!" A gasp as the sobbing boy was hit again.

"Where was he, changeling? What did he look like?"

DO NOT PAUSE. Heimdall's voice was firm. RESCUE THEM.

Yes. Rescue them. But do it with style.

"He looks like this!" Hiccup shouted. Surprised cries. The evening did not blind Hiccup because they had been flying in the dark. The crystal gleamed even whiter, making his entrance more spectacular.

He saw Alvin standing with his sword, Savage punching a pale-skinned boy, and Nephil crumpled in the boy's arms like a twisted kite. Bruises were already blooming, but the boy wouldn't stop clutching the injured dragon to his chest, protecting it. Nephil was taking ragged breaths, swishing a broken tail.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" Hiccup and Toothless charged. The Night Fury released a smaller fireball that did not miss. Savage was knocked backward, and they reached to scoop up the

boy and Nephil out of harm's way. Toothless soared higher.

"Skinny one, look out!" the boy cried out faintly.

Then Hiccup heard it. The familiar magnified sound of roars, confusing Toothless and grounding him. Another bearded chief with a double-headed axe, shouting orders.

"Alvin, you didn't tell me your dragon trainer was going to be on this island!" He shouted, one eye twitching.

"I didn't know he was going to be here." Alvin grinned. "But let's make the best of a good situation. You take him, and I take the runt."

"Oh come on!" Hiccup said with exasperation. He realized where he had seen the crest that gleamed from the scaly armor. The Hysteric tribe, with their fancy invention and forceful recruiting methods. They had sent Hiccup an invitation to become a Hysteric last winter, which got ignored because a Monstrous Nightmare had kidnapped Hiccup. He had planned to turn down the invitation anyway.

The thing about Hysterics? They never take no for an answer. And Toothless was losing altitude, unable to protect his ears from the noise.

8. Chapter Seven

It occurred to Hiccup that Norbert the Nutjob, chief of the Hysterics, looked a little worse for wear. With a beard that reached his knees, Norbert had an eye that twitched with glee as he ordered his men to aim their horns at him and Toothless. He was stroking his axe blade with almost compulsive vigor, making line after line of blood on his fingers. That couldn't be good for his heart.

The Hysteric crest consisted of a boar holding a brain and a mysterious brown blob, one that was rumored to be a vegetable. No one knew for certain, of course, because those who questioned a Hysteric often found the Hysteric recruiting him for the tribe.

Toothless beat his wings, flapping his ears down to shut out the noise of wailing dragons. It didn't affect Hiccup, although the rune stone throbbed against his chest like a marble-sized boil. He kept his grip on the rainbow crystal as the Outcasts threw their bolas.

"Gods!" They swerved to dodge the first line of fire, but Toothless couldn't gain altitude. One made a bee-line for Hiccup's chest. He winced and closed his eyes.

A rush of wind. Hiccup opened his eyes. The bola had spun past him and Toothless. The rune stone's throbbing now felt cheerful.

"Akdis," he said with realization. "Protection."

Savage had recovered. He wiped the sand from his armor and clenched his fists.

"Until I rip it off you." The sand solidified and twisted into massive hands, reaching as if from a rotten grave. The Hysterics increased the noise and Toothless screeched in pain.

"Heimdall," the boy croaked from beneath Toothless's claws; the dragon in his arms didn't even respond to the noise. "Heimdall. Help."

Of course. Hiccup should have thought of it sooner; he was holding a direct line to the guardian of the Bifrost! Already the colors swirled around them like coils of metal, ensnaring them in light. Heimdall spoke through the crystal.

YOU MAY WANT TO CLOSE YOUR EYES. I DO NOT KNOW WHAT THIS WILL DO TO MORTALS.

Hiccup obeyed even though he could hear the readied catapults, the stones whirling past them. Nephil gave a rattling breath while Mud gasped. The light pressed into him.

Then he heard the sound of collapse, of bodies thudding to grass. Hiccup had to open his eyes, and he found himself and Toothless back on Berk, hovering just above the ground where Ivor's blood had spilled. By now the blood had dried to an ugly brown, like a stain on the grass.

His father, Gobber, Astrid and the others were there too with their dragons, all of them clutching their eyes. The dragons covered their heads with their wings and slumped, even Hookfang. Tuffnut and Ruffnut were the only ones who seemed to enjoy this state of mind; Fishlegs was on his knees, while Snotlout tried to hold his retching back. He ran off after a moment. The adults managed to get back on their feet, but Gobber's eyes still swirled with red and purple hues.

"Quite a ride, eh, Stoick?" he managed.

Stoick shook it off. "Hiccup, what happened?"

Hiccup was about to happen, but the four baby dragons had also appeared, with their basket. They seemed surprised, as if the rainbow had plucked them out of the air. Scents hit their snouts, round or pointed, and they started to explore. Gunhild remained frozen. She already saw Nephil's broken body.

Toothless let Mud and Nephil go before landing; it was a gentle fall. Mud sprawled on the moist soil. He was unconscious, breathing shallow gasps. Hiccup bent down and pulled the baby dragon from the boy's arms. Nephil weighed as much as a chicken feather.

"Gods, he's tiny," Hiccup said. "They both are."

Nephil seemed to not hear. His eyes were closed, and his green tail had stopped swishing.

An uncomfortable sensation slipped through Hiccup. He placed his fingers on Nephil's chest and felt nothing. Nothing but cold scales.

NO! Gunhild cried. Her siblings charged at Hiccup; he dropped to his

knees so they could crowd around the prone dragon. Their tongues shot out, and they began licking him. Toothless realized what the babies were doing and bent over to lick the broken bones.

Right, Hiccup thought numbly. _Night Fury saliva had healing properties._

COMPRESS, COMPRESS, Gunhild ordered; she whacked her tail against Nephil's chest rapidly, with little thumps. The blows made Hiccup's arms shake, but he did not let go of the dragon.

COME ON, YOU BIG BABY, Ardis shrieked at Nephil; orange veins sliced through her eyes. YOU HAVE TO GET UP AND GROW MORE!

YOU STILL NEED TO LEARN TO FLY! Einar licked at him frantically. YOU NEED TO AVENGE OUR UNCLE!

WE **NEED **YOU, NEPHIL, Helgi said simply, but he already stood a distance away, averting his eyes.

Stoick came over. His eyes were sober as he reached to pull Hiccup from the swarm of dragons.

"He's not going to wake up," he told the dragons. "I'm sorry."

Hiccup shook his dad away before laying Nephil's body on the ground. The disbelief wouldn't go away.

Just like Ivor. And he managed to save Astrid from . . . what happened to him.

Ardis let loose a spiraling wail that made her brothers- Toothless included- flatten their ears to block the sound. All the humans, even Hiccup, could not bear to listen; they had to cover their ears. It was not the loudness of Ardis's screams, but rather the _intensity_, the grief and regret that she had not been kinder, that fate had taken the baby before he could fly, that _someone_ would think of hurting him.

After two minutes of wailing, she slumped to the ground, praying in a screechy warble. Einar and Helgi held back their wails, standing with narrowed eyes and shaking.

WE MUST AVENGE HIM, Einar whispered.

HE WAS MURDERED, Helgi agreed.

Gunhild turned to the crystal. Her yellow eyes also shone orange, with the veins pulsing through them like angry bolts of lightning.

YOU KILLED HIM! She wailed, like a banshee in morning. YOU KNEW HE WOULDN'T SURVIVE THE JOURNEY BY RAINBOW!

I HAD TO SAVE YOU THREE AND MUD, Heimdall responded through the crystal, AND THE MORTALS. I'M SORRY, GUNHILD, BUT I HAD A DUTY TO OBEY. AND DID I BREAK HIS BONES AND TWIST HIS ORGANS IN SUCH A HORRENDOUS WAY?

Gunhild could not respond, but her body shook with more wailing. Hiccup went over and put his arms around her. Toothless wrapped his wings around them both and closed his eyes, silent. The other babies joined them, silent and shaking. Their bodies were warm and dry against his legs.

Hiccup could not even begin to imagine what his dragon was thinking, what it was like to rediscover family only to have fate tear the smallest one away. Toothless made no sound, but he rubbed his wings over Gunhild. Ardis's throat gave out, and she leaned against her big brother.

* * *

><p>In Asgard, a heavysset maiden watched over a sleeping dragon, sedated and resting in a hot spring. She wore a white apron covered in bloodstains, and her long hands were drenched in scorched scales.<p>

She felt a pair of small eyes on her and turned. She dropped to her knees and clutched green smoke.

"Oh you poor thing," she said. "Killed by a god?"

The soul solidifying in front of her gave a nod and mumbled something. Freya's thick eyebrows rose.

"TWO gods? That is unusual." She glanced at Gris, who turned in the bubbling waters. "Heimdall must have sent you to me, if you're hers."

The soul tried to speak.

"No, wait. Let me rearrange you first." She worked quickly, resetting the bones that had been broken in life, repairing the throat that had been crushed. "Who did this to you?"

"Magni, son of Thor and Jarnsaxa." The voice was faint but the eyes clear. "Then Heimdall, with bright colors."

Freya hid her confusion about the first accusation. What would Magni be doing on Midgard? Heimdall made sense, for few injured creatures could survive a journey through the Bifrost, and it seems Heimdall had been trying to rescue this poor creature.

The soul spoke rapidly, as if afraid that it would vanish like steam. "He crushed me in rock, he betrayed Mud. I was going to be _big._"

"Then big you shall be," she promised, grabbing her tools and stray scales that Gris had shed. The soul's accusations could wake, until it was properly changed. "We reward heroes in Asgard, you know, especially the bravest ones."

Despite being dead and barely solid enough to lick her fingers, the soul couldn't help but wink with cheeriness.

* * *

><p>Stoick was examining the unconscious boy, turning him over. His

expression remained serious as he examined the large bruises and shallow breathing. Gobber also trudged over, rubbing his eyes.<p>

"Lad looks like he's been manhandled," he said softly. "Those are fingernail marks on his neck."

"Large and unwashed fingernails." Stoick turned to Hiccup. "Who is this, Hiccup? Do you know who did this to him?"

Hiccup would have liked to say no, he did not know, he just knew there were three dragons in the throes of grief and he had to tend to them because he was the only dragon trainer in commission. But Stoick gave him an authoritative, piercing look that forbade any lies.

"He was the brown Night Fury Mud, I think," Hiccup said. "The Outcasts did this to him. Maybe Alvin scratched him, definitely Savage punched him."

Hiccup knew that fierce look that his father bore when Outcasts were mentioned, as well as the perplexed expression at hearing such a ridiculous guess.

"It's true," Astrid said; she finally came over, composure and sight regained. "That's Mud."

"Oh come on. The gods don't make cool things like that," Tuffnut said.

"Think he can change into a Monstrous Nightmare?" Ruffnut asked. "Then he can set Tuffnut on fire."

Hiccup ignored them. Astrid punched the two of them.

"I saw it. He changed from a dragon into a boy," she said.

"Fascinating," Fishlegs said faintly. "Maybe we should put him in the Book of Dragons if I can move from this spot."

"He's not a species," Stoick said sharply; they looked up in surprise. "He's a boy. And he's hurt."

The chief picked up Mud gently, as if he were a delicate ornament. His hands were stiff, his voice still giving orders.

"We better get him inside. It's going to be a cold night," he said. "Gobber, can you-"

"Absolutely! Nothing a bit of Gobber medicine can't help." The one-handed man gave a cheery grin. He took Mud and shifted him to one shoulder. The boy cried out as a bruise was jostled, and Gobber softened his grip.

Hiccup watched them go. He was torn between going to help, to confirm the suspicion that started when his father's face had grown tender, and staying to comfort the babies who didn't want to leave Toothless's protective wings. Astrid was already heading towards them.

"Your dad's right. We should go in," she said.

The babies heard. They straightened up, and Toothless opened his black wings.

CAN WE TAKE NEPHIL WITH US? Gunhild asked. WE NEED TO GIVE HIM AN AUTOPSY.

"What's an autopsy?" Astrid asked.

YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW, Helgi said. MUD TOLD US ABOUT AUTOPSIES. YOU MAY CONSIDER THEM SACRILEGIOUS.

****I**** CAN DO IT, Ardis said. I HAVE SHARP CLAWS.

WE ALL WILL HELP. WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT INJURIES KILLED HIM, Gunhild responded.

Hiccup took off his shirt and wrapped Nephil's body in it. He picked him up, ignored the coldness, and walked to catch up with his father. Astrid and the babies kept to his pace, Einar fighting with Ardis for the lead. Gunhild grabbed the basket and thus lagged; Fishlegs had to rescue the basket so that she wouldn't be left behind.

The twins hung in the rear, rubbing their heads and grinning. They were already whispering what a dragon-boy could do to an entire forest.

9. Chapter Eight

Gobber often did most of his medical work, both with dragon teeth and humans, in the comfort of the smithy. He gestured that Stoick and the others follow him there.

"After all, what's good for the reptile is good for the Viking-reptile," he said with a cheery wink. His cheeriness did not lighten the somber mood.

A sudden wind blew through them and made their hair dance. Hiccup shivered because he had taken off his shirt, as you remember. He hurried forward with his unwanted bundle.

The baby dragons found the walk to the village square interesting. As the scents changed, so did their sense of directions. Even in grief they wanted to explore, and Toothless had to circle to keep them together. Einar then smelt burning metal and pointed his red snout towards the smithy.

WEAPONS! He said excitedly. SWORDS! ARROWS!

REVENGE, Helgi responded.

DRAGONS DON'T USE SWORDS, Ardis told them. THAT'S WHAT OUR FIRE AND CLAWS ARE FOR, FLAME-BUTTS.

CLAWS AND FIRE ARE UGLY WEAPONS, Einar said. SWORD-FIGHTING IS GRACEFUL, AN ART.

YOU'VE HEARD TOO MANY ADVENTURE STORIES FROM MUD. Ardis rolled her

eyes. BESIDES, YOU DON'T HAVE HUMAN HANDS. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO PICK UP THOSE SWORDS?

WE'LL THINK OF SOMETHING, Helgi replied. HEROES HAVE TO BE SMART THESE DAYS WHEN SEEKING REVENGE AGAINST MEAN HUMANS.

"I don't like where this conversation is going," Hiccup muttered to Astrid. "Dragons with swords?"

She gave an awkward shrug, awkward because of her limp. "We've seen stranger things. I know I have today."

"Astrid--"

"It's my fault their little brother is dead." She pointed at the bundle Hiccup was carrying. "If I hadn't called Savage ugly, Nephil wouldn't have had to rescue me."

He looked down at her boots. Covered in crumbling rock and he saw bruises creeping up to the knees. She would refuse to take medicine and hated it when others mentioned her injuries.

"Astrid, if Nephil hadn't saved you, we wouldn't have known that Outcasts were on Rainbow Isle," he said, "or that we were under attack."

"But he could have saved himself as well," Astrid responded flatly. She stroked Stormfly as she walked. "Why did he stay trapped in that rock?"

Hiccup had no answer to that. The babies tore into the smithy after Gobber and Stoick.

Fishlegs, still clutching the basket, had his watery eyes on Mud. Meatlug nudged him forward with comfort. Snotlout was still rubbing his face and asking what had happened, and Hookfang had fared no better. The twins hung back, watching Mud but too afraid to ask anything with the chief carrying the boy.

They couldn't all go inside; not enough room in the smithy for them and their dragons. Fishlegs volunteered to wait with Meatlug, but Astrid said she needed to rest her legs. She climbed onto Stormfly and sauntered off, still looking guilty. Hookfang took off with Snotlout the minute Hiccup said they could go. The twins wanted to stay, but Stoick's glare and pointed finger sent them to their house. They went sullenly, and their dragon hissed at them.

Inside, the heat from the smithy fire comforted Hiccup and the cold body he was carrying. Ardis stood on her hind legs to see Stoick and Gobber put Mud on a wooden table that usually held Hiccup's drawings or spare weapons to be repaired. His vest had been reduced to shreds, but they took it off anyway to examine the bruises.

Einar and Helgi focused their yellow eyes on a pile of weapons.

HELLO, MY NAME IS INIGO MONTROYA, Einar said with a mischievous gleam.

SHUT UP, Ardis replied. IS HE GOING TO BE OKAY?

HE'LL BE FINE, Gunhild told her. ODIN WENT INTO A DEEP SLEEP WHEN THE GREEN DEATH DRAINED HIM OF MAGIC. WE ONLY HAVE TO WORRY IF MUD STOPS BREATHING.

MUD WAS **DRAINED**? Einar looked horrified. BUT THAT MAKES HIM . .
.

MORTAL, Gunhild responded with sad eyes.

"Mortal? Drained? What does that mean?" Hiccup asked.

IT MEANS HE'S LOST HIS VANIR STRENGTH AND ESSENCE, Gunhild told him. She beat her wings with anger. SOMEONE TOOK IT FROM HIM. MUD CAN STILL CHANGE TO BE LIKE US, BUT HE IS NOW AS VULNERABLE AS YOU MORTALS ARE. HE CAN DIE AND GET HURT.

"Vanir?" Hiccup couldn't stop his voice from rising in amazement. "You mean he's-"

Gunhild made a shushing, hissing noise.

YES, HE IS. BUT HE DOESN'T LIKE ADVERTISING IT.

Hiccup considered. Gods and child gods were supposed to be big and brawny, able to wield hammers and charge headfirst into battle. Mud was three heads shorter than most Viking kids and looked like he could barely carry a heavy weapon. And Savage had called him, "Father's greatest failure."

It stirred disbelief and yes, some resentment. They had hiccups like Mud in Asgard? And no one ever talked about them in the myths?

Gobber tied the ice to each bruise with leather straps. The boy's skin had turned red and purple from the blows, and he shuddered as the cold hit his sore spots.

"Some wise guy must have thought his chest was a piece of meat, the way they were beating him," Stoick commented.

"Quite a scrawny morsel then; the Outcasts must have been starving."

"It's not funny, Gobber; whatever happened, it wasn't a fair fight. No lad of this size could fend off a four hundred pound Outcast; certainly Alvin must have defeated him easily."

"That's not true," Hiccup spoke. Both men turned. "Mud killed the Whispering Death that Alvin was riding; we saw its body."

Gobber looked astounded. Stoick regained his fierceness.

"Kill Alvin's dragon? Are you sure, Hiccup?"

Hiccup wasn't sure, but he didn't say so.

"That's how it looked when we were chasing him and Nephil down; surely Alvin wouldn't slice up his own riding dragon like an eel and leave him to rot in a tunnel."

Stoick closed his eyes.

"Alvin would if a sacrifice suited his purpose. Why didn't Mud kill him while he was at it?"

The boy seemed to have heard the question, for he shuddered. Stoick, afraid to speak further, nodded at Hiccup to go.

WE NEED YOUR HELP WITH THE AUTOPSY, Gunhild tried to say this in a whisper but her warble wouldn't allow it. WILL YOU SWEAR NOT TO FREAK OUT? WHERE CAN WE DO IT WITH PRIVACY?

Hiccup thought. "I know a place."

WILL YOU TAKE US THERE?

"Sure, why not. I just need to get another shirt." Hiccup staggered into the back of the smithy where he had a spare outfit in case of emergencies. Gobber's whispers followed like unwanted dandelion seeds.

"Mighty coincidence, wouldn't you say? Scrawny, brown hair, green eyes--"

"It's a coincidence." His dad's voice was final.

"You heard the dragons, Stoick; he's part Vanir. It may be possible."

"The gods would not be that cruel."

Hiccup tried not to listen; he set Nephil's body on a table and reached for the spare tunic. His dad usually hardened his tone when denying something that could break him in two. After slipping on the shirt, he tried to sidle past the two men without hearing anything else.

"Stoick, it may not be cruelty. Maybe the gods are showing mercy."

* * *

><p>Eos breathed hard. Her roots tugged at the ironwood roots, kept tugging, slowly but surely. She was glad that Alvin had left, for it gave her time. The phone had not rung since Heluth had called,<p>

Sweat dripped down her transparent face, giving the appearance that she was melting. A few roots shot under the pentagram, deep into the soil of this island. The sensations that swept through the roots made her shudder.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, darling."

She looked up abruptly. Boris the guard had fallen asleep with his mouth open; a shame or she could have used his brute strength to pull at the ironwood stakes. Yet a shadow was using his mouth to speak, in a cultured tongue she knew too well.

"Loki."

"You've never been a good liar, Eos, even when no one can see your face. Heluth told me you were on Midgard." The shadow curled with amusement.

Eos placed thin fingers to her forehead. "I'm taking away her phone privileges when I get back."

"Oh come now, darling, you know you're in deep muck here." He emphasized the 'muck' by smacking Boris's tongue loudly. "What you're doing is resourceful, but you're not exactly solid and hearty."

"What do you mean?"

He gestured with Boris's thumb. "Those bits of iron wood are the only things keep you here and keeping you whole. Once they're destroying," the thumb shot down and he made a whooshing sound. "Goodbye darling, hello disintegrated soul on Midgard."

"Do you have a better idea? Can you send me back?" She tried not to sound eager.

"I don't know," he said, as if he were being asked to solve a simple math problem. "It seems all the books for casting the runes have vanished from this island, though I have been trying to look for one that won't burn my fingers."

Her eagerness dropped away. "It figures. This mortal, Alvin, is resourceful. He thinks I'm some woman he once killed."

"And are you?"

"I was," she answered shortly, and that's when she realized why she didn't like the sensations from the roots. The feelings carried vestiges of her Midgard life, memories of a fleshy mask pressed over her gentle soul, clamping around her like a thick brace. She didn't want to remember, to have that stupidity suffocating her, not when she had Heluth and Mud in the Underworld.

As if suspecting what she was thinking, Loki said, "Technically Mud is on Midgard as well. Should I tell him you're here?"

"No!" Eos almost shouted. She took a deep, grating breath. "Alvin isn't stupid, Loki; if he was trying to chain Heluth in here—"

"He was what?"

Another deep breath. "Trying to summon Heluth from the Underworld. They got me instead, since Heluth cannot leave the Underworld through Ragnarak."

"And what," Loki's voice became deadly silk, "were they planning to do once they had my little girl trapped like you are now?"

"I don't know," Eos said, "but they are not pleasant people. I don't want Mud tangling with them."

The shadow's ends curled. Eos swirled dandelion flowers between her fingers. She waited.

"Just so you know, darling, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for my daughter because she needs a proper parent since I can only visit the Underworld." The shadow swelled with a deep breath. "I'm going to do all I can in my power to rescue you, so you can be that parent for Heluth. Until that happens, I give you freedom of the Loki trees, since they grow all over this barren place, so you know what's going on outside of this chamber."

The air quivered. Boris coughed as grey spores swirled around him.

"And what," Eos asked, "do I have to do in return?"

"Keep yourself intact. Don't lose your soul to the roots you've set down. Don't change into the Midgard woman you once were, if you can help it."

She gave him a look. "That's it? Aren't you supposed to ask for something chaotic, or impossible?"

The shadow revealed twinkling eyes. Boris groaned. "Very well. You also have to make a phone call."

* * *

><p>Fishlegs had followed them to the cove, since he carried Gunhild's basket. He couldn't watch the autopsy, however; Meatlug shielded his gaze as Hiccup and the babies made the incisions. They guarded the basket and tried not to look at the strange objects.<p>

As for Hiccup and Toothless, they didn't find the process appealing, but it was very mechanical. Gunhild noted the dust and rubble covering Nephil, the same debris that had coated Astrid's boots and Mud's bare feet. That's when they set their brother's body on a flat slab and told Hiccup where to cut. He used a small hunting knife, and they used their claws to pull out the tiny organs and bones.

HEAD TRAUMA, BLOOD CLOTTING. BONES ARE NORMALLY BROKEN LIKE THIS WHEN IMPACTED WITH A HEAVIER OBJECT, Gunhild said. WE CAN ASSUME THAT A ROCKSLIDE OF SOME SORT HAPPENED, SMOTHERING NEPHIL SLOWLY, BASED ON THE RUBBLE COVERING HIM. THE TRAUMA IS CENTERED ON HIS RIB-CAGE AND LUNGS. OH, I WISH MUD WERE HERE; HE KNOWS THE DETAILS ABOUT FORENSICS.

MUD ISN'T HERE, Ardis reminded her. AND ROCK SLIDES DON'T HAPPEN ON RAINBOW ISLE. WE KNOW THAT.

WE ALSO KNOW THAT NEPHIL WAS STILL ALIVE BEFORE THE BIFROST KILLED HIM, Gunhild looked at Hiccup. RIGHT?

He nodded. "But he wasn't covered in rock when he got him. The Whispering Death could have trapped him like that, if the dirt were rocky."

SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT, Einar said.

MURDER, Helgi agreed.

Hiccup decided to take a leap of faith as he rewrapped Nephil's body and the separate organs. "Could someone of _Asgard_ have smothered Nephil in rocky dirt?"

The babies considered. Toothless gave Hiccup a curious look.

SEVERAL COULD HAVE, Einar said. BUT WHY WOULD THEY?

BECAUSE THEY HATE DRAGONS, Gunhild said with fierceness. MAGNI COULD HAVE.

GUNNY, YOU CAN'T JUST MAKE WILD ACCUSATIONS, Ardis said, sounding sensible for once. JUST BECAUSE MAGNI WAS ROUGH ON MUD AS A HATCHLING DOESN'T MEAN HE WOULD KILL A DRAGON. HE'S NEVER EVEN BEEN TO MIDGARD.

I KNOW WHO MURDERED OUR BROTHER, Gunhild said stubbornly.

"Right," Hiccup said. "Fishlegs?"

There was a gasp from Fishlegs. "Are they done with the cutting?"

"Yes, they're done with the cutting," Hiccup said. "Who is Magni in Asgard?"

"One of two brothers destined to rebuild the world after Ragnorak," Fishlegs recited. "Son of Thor and Jarnsaxa, a good-looking Jotun woman. His brother is--"

Vibrating from the basket. It made Fishlegs cringe in fear. All the dragons shot up, Toothless included.

PHONE! Gunhild screeched. BRING IT HERE!

Fishlegs looked like it was the last thing he wanted to do, but Toothless took initiative. He snatched the basket in his teeth and brought it over. Gunhild reached in with her snout and touched the block of rainbow that leaned against the sapling.

AUNT OYSTER! She started to say, but the other babies started talking as well, each trying to say what had happened. Hiccup could barely hear the woman's voice, if any sound was coming from the rainbow.

SHUT UP, ALL OF YOU, Gunhild said. She cocked her ear to listen. YOU WANT WHAT? WELL, OKAY.

She straightened up with the block in her teeth. TAKE THIS TO YOUR FATHER, HICCUP.

"Why?" Hiccup grabbed the block, felt the colors swirl against his fingers.

MUD'S MOTHER WANTS TO SPEAK TO HIM.

10. Chapter Nine

Stoick didn't want to be interrupted, but he didn't seem to be doing

anything. He was standing just inside the smithy rubbing his hands on Thornado, shifting from one boot to the other. Hiccup still walked forward, hands cupping the rainbow crystal.

"Hiccup; where are the fledglings?"

"In the cove." Hiccup handed the phone to him. "Mud's mother wants to speak to you."

"Good." He grabbed the rainbow block and barked into it. "You are the boy's mother?"

A muted voice came from the block, making the stripes shimmer. Thornado shied away from the noise.

"I can't hear you; are you trapped in the crystal?"

Hiccup sighed, thought of what Gunhild had done. He grabbed his Stoick's hand and guided the vibrating crystal to his dad's ear.

Once that happened, a change came over Stoick; his bearded mouth opened, and he whispered a word that Hiccup couldn't quite catch. His dad then asked a question in a tremulous voice. The answer made his face collapse into a broken, tender expression.

Something told Hiccup to leave, that he wasn't privy to this conversation. Besides, the fledglings wanted to hold Nephil's funeral, and he had to make sure they didn't set the woods on fire. He turned to go, disturbed by the broken look on his father's face. He had only seen it once, when Stoick had thought Hiccup had died in a treasure hunt.

Why would Stoick care about a boy they had just rescued? Did Hiccup dare think about the most logical answer?

* * *

><p>"Stoick."<p>

He was thunderstruck, and it was strange because he had not heard this voice in ten years, not since Hiccup was a toddler, and yet he knew who it was. That was why he mouthed her name.

"Is it you?" he whispered.

"Yes." Her voice swept over him like a gentle wave sweeps over a smooth rock.

"Then-" he glanced back into the open smithy, where Mud turned in his sleep. "Then Mud is-"

"Yes. How is he?"

"Sleeping," he told her. It didn't feel right to tell her the details, to outline each bruise on Mud's chest.

"And he's all right? Gunhild said Rainbow Isle fell."

"He's all right. So are the fledglings. For now."

"Thank the gods." She seemed to be on the verge of tears. "Thank the gods."

"How is this possible?" He didn't know why he kept whispering, or why she didn't ask about his other son. "I saw you die. I saw your body buried."

"Odin makes things possible." This was tinged with bitterness.

"Are you alive?"

"No. I haven't been alive for a long time. But Mud is."

He rubbed his temple, practically broke the rainbow block as he squeezed it.

"Gods," he kept saying. "Gods. Where are you?"

"I don't know, exactly, but I cannot leave easily. It's not a friendly place. Otherwise . . ." her voice trailed off. "Thank you for saving him. Thank you."

"It's what we do," he grunted. "I've always protected our Hiccup."

"As I knew you would." This was hesitation, as if she had trouble remembering who Hiccup was. "Will you take care of him? Keep him safe?"

Stoick didn't have to think hard to give his answer. It was disbelief that stopped him from immediately responding, as well as the anger that she didn't remember his firstborn. Only concern for Mud, although Mud needed that concern. Mercy, as Gobber had suggested, or more pain to awaken his heart?

"I will. I promise."

"Thank you."

He had so many questions, so many things to ask that each of them crowded into his mouth and would not let the other respond.

"I'll call again, when I can."

"If only-" he started, and then regained his courage. "If only I could see you, to know that you were real."

"I haven't always been real, Stoick, but my love for you always was." Her voice was filled with regret. "Souls do not last long on Midgard, or I would have come sooner."

"I've always loved you as well," he responded. A moment of silence then, just hearing each other's breathing.

"Good bye. I love you as much as I always have." A beep and her voice vanished.

Stoick released his tightened fingers. He had cracked the crystal at the edges from clenching it so hard.

Thornado offered his large head up for patting. Stoick found himself stroking the dragon, talking to him. The cold night already seemed chillier.

"It was her, Thornado," he kept saying. "It was HER."

* * *

><p>On the beach, Hiccup and Fishlegs had tied together limbs to make a raft for Nephil's body. They then set Nephil on the raft and waded into the surf. Behind them Meatlug started a fire on the sand, waiting to dry their clothes.<p>

The dragon was still wrapped in Hiccup's shirt, but he wasn't going to retrieve it at this point. Fishlegs still looked green that the babies had wanted to cut up their younger brother and examine each organ. It hadn't helped that Hiccup insisted on replacing the bruised heart and lungs before rewrapping the body.

THE WAVES ARE LOUD, Gunhild commented, her large eyes on the black horizon. AND A STORM IS COMING.

"Are you ready?" Hiccup backed away from the raft. Fishlegs did the same.

All the babies and Toothless reared. They shot five fireballs so that they hit the raft at the same time. The blaze passed Hiccup's cheek. He and Fishlegs quickly made their way to the shore.

"You could have waited till we were out of range?" Fishlegs panted. He shivered and knelt in front of Meatlug's campfire. His dragon nuzzled him.

Hiccup stayed in the shallow surf, well out of range. The raft burned quickly, sending shards of sparks into the air. Ardis and Gunhild watched their brother blaze into the sky as sparks.

HE WAS NAMED FOR A RACE OF GIANTS, Gunhild said. NEPHIL WAS BORN SMALL, BUT HE NEVER LET THAT STOP HIM FROM TRYING TO GROW.

HE WAS LIKE OUR UNCLE IVOR, Einar added. HE WOULD NEVER TURN FROM A FIGHT, NO MATTER HOW OFTEN HE LOST.

HE NEVER MISSED WHEN SHOOTING FIRE, AND HE REMEMBERED MUD'S STORIES BEST, Helgi recalled fondly. AND HE LIKED BAKED CLAMS WHEN WE WENT DOWN TO THE BEACH.

Ardis took time to say her part. She closed her eyes, took a quavering breath, and began to sing softly, under her breath. Her soprano voice could dive into the deeper scales, oddly enough. It sounded like a mourning song, but it was one that Mud had taught them, one that wouldn't be written for several hundred years. Hiccup and Fishlegs didn't know that of course, but they sensed that the music was not from their time, or even from their country. Gunhild joined her on the second verse.

AND WHERE THE JOURNEY MAY LEAD YOU

LET THIS PRAYER BE YOUR GUIDE

THOUGH IT MAY TAKE YOU SO FAR AWAY

ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR PRIDE

They repeated this with several chants in a tongue Hiccup could not identify. Einar and Helgi flattened their ears, but they took in each word. The soft melody swirled around the burning raft, guiding the sparks into the storm clouds. The clouds thundered on, oblivious to the mourning.

This isn't over, Hiccup thought, listening with a sense of doom and sadness. He crawled to where Fishlegs fed more twigs to the fire and clutched his shaking arms. _This was just a squall. The real storm is yet to come._

11. Chapter Ten

Drifting. Roots curling around his soul. A separated essence coming together, blurring at the seams.

"Poor Mud." A sympathetic giggle, malicious and comforting. "Poor, innocent Mud."

He opened his eyes, and wished he hadn't. He floated in a ring of ironwood, and the sensation made him feel nauseous. Odd really, since he wasn't in his physical body. Yet he felt sick to his white stomach and dizzy.

"My ladies," he said, and attempted to bow. It was hard to do, given he had no form, but he managed a lopsided curve.

"Polite as always." Another giggle. "Our favorite pupil."

Your only pupil, Mud thought, and he marveled at how the thoughts came together. A fog had collected in his brain, and he found it hard to assemble his emotions with memories.

The Norns lounged around their looms, surrounding him. Long, white hair that spooled around their feet like silk pools. They lived beneath the World Tree's roots, fed on its rich insides as they spun. Weavers of fate, the Kindly Ones, the three Graces. Urd, Verdandi, and Skold; Past, Present and Future. Age and weaving had wrinkled their hands, but their minds remained sharp and youthful. Skold had a curved back, for she had to keep watch on people's ever-changing actions.

"Am I a vegetable?" he asked.

"You almost were," Verdandi commented. "Now questions for a question, as we always have done. Odin peeled your mind apart?"

Mud nodded. As he had entered the deep sleep, he still had to give his testimony to the All-Father given that Rainbow Isle had fallen and bad mortals had threatened the Bifrost. To observe the truth, Odin had separated emotion from perception. A mortal would have gone insane from the procedure, and Mud nearly had. People weren't meant to view events objectively, to view horrifying events and weigh their horrible nature.

"It does not matter," Skold sighed. "The gods are in denial that one of their own would betray Mud to a mortal, especially our Mud."

"Why am I here?" he asked.

"To learn," Verdandi tutted. "Always the time for lessons, especially in sleep. But there is another answer, which you will also learn if you answer honestly and thoughtfully. I have lots of questions for you."

Mud let out a hysterical laugh. He had just been drained of Vanir essence, lost his smallest cousin to death, seen his glorious brother possess a murderous mortal, and had the All-Father peel his mind apart. Yet the Norns wanted him to learn. How TYPICAL.

"I go first," Urd said. "You lost the battle with Alvin the Treacherous when you could have won. What was your mistake?"

"I turned my back," he answered in a flat voice; this was easy. "I did not finish him."

"And?" she prompted.

A mutter came out.

"Louder, dear."

"I hated the gamey blood," he said loudly. "I killed his dragon on impulse when I should have killed HIM first. I was too bloody scared."

Urd tutted and she was drier and more patronizing than her sister's. "No need for hysterics, Mud. You didn't finish the job, and you paid for it. So now you know. Your question."

"Why did Magni do it?"

"Why did he do what? Scratch his nose when the sun set?"

He hated this part, the asking. A deep breath to calm his voice. "Why did Magni betray me to this mortal? Why did he watch as I begged him for help?"

"Better, dear. Better." Urd pulled a string from the loom: magenta, and gleaming. "But I only answer one question at a time. Hold out your left hand."

He somehow took the thread despite having no solid form, traced his transparent fingers along the edge, and saw the last couple of days. He saw but he did not comprehend. Not yet.

Father and Magni hunting; their quarry a young doe. The lightning hitting her, the heart stopped. Father not happy, muttering, "My greatest failure." Magni climbing through a tree, the World Tree. Watching. Talking to Skold and Verdandi. _Bargaining _with them.

The images faded, and the string returned to the loom. Mud floated with a frozen, horrified expression.

"That's why," Urd said, returning to her weaving.

"Why did you help him?" Mud burst out. "You said destiny could not be changed, except at a high price. Did he lie to you about his bloody intentions?"

"Oh no, Mud. He asked for advice," Verdandi said; she liked to pick her questions rather than answer the first one asked. "Advice about how to make Thor happy. Whether we helped him, only time will tell."
"

"Sweetheart, no one can lie to us," Urd reminded him. "We just prefer honesty because it saves time. Now how is a question: how did he know where we were?"

"You know few can navigate through the World Tree's roots," Skold said. "And for good reason. If ANYONE were to bother us to change a fate or two, why, then all of time would unravel."

Mud closed his eyes, still sifting through the images that had just flashed through his head.

"He followed me." His voice was flat. "He somehow caught sight of me limping to my previous lesson and marked the path to you, to visit later. Is this my fault then? Did I build my own pyre?"

"You didn't know what Magni was planning," Urd answered. "So no, this is not your fault. But be more careful in the future. How were you careless BEFORE the fight?"

Mud blinked against the transition from someone else's memories to his own. Again the answer came easily. "I didn't listen to Nephil or Astrid. They heard the Whispering Death before I did. I was too caught up in grief and anger."

"Good, good!" Urd clapped her hands. "We're making progress here. So what have you learned?"

"Don't let my emotions guide my stroke," he said. "Especially not fear or anger."

"And trust those around you, especially those who are just as suspicious."

"Do you have a question for me?" Skold fluttered her aged eyelashes.

"I do." Mud looked at her in the eye. "If I need to trust these mortals, I can't stay in the bonny sleep, can I? I have to wake up before regaining my former strength." The thought did not lift his dour mood.

"You are a poor thing," she responded, "but yes. Now is not the time for sleep, what with Magni helping the Outcasts?"

"You will never regain your full strength now that Alvin the Treacherous has your essence," Verdandi said. "He has power over you, if he chooses to use it."

"But now I'm mortal. I've lost my sword, and my magic. There is not

hope."

"Not all of your magic," Verdandi corrected. "That will grow back in due time."

"The little hiccup that saved you was mortal," Urd spoke up. "The one you called skinny. He managed to stop the war between dragons and the humans and rescue Fury from the Green Death."

"He's too trusting," Mud responded, knowing he was missing the point. "He took Heimdall's orders blindly and got himself in over his head. If not for Heimdall, we would have been caught terribly." His voice shook.

"Will you trust him despite that mishap?" Skold asked. "Even if he miscalculated, do you still owe him?"

"No, I can't trust him, but I do owe him my life, and the babies' lives." No mention of Nephil.

"How will you repay that favor? It isn't often that mortals rescue a god."

"I'm not a god anymore, if I ever was." Mud knew the Norns hated to hear this, but they didn't like it when people lied either. "But I'll think of something."

Verdandi clicked her tongue. "You can't let others define who you are, Muddy. You know that."

"I know it," Mud replied. "But I've spent my whole life defined by others. 'Mud' is the first name I've chosen for myself, and I've been trying to forge my own path, to do what I want while not letting my selfishness hurt others."

"You have the knowledge of past, present and future." Skold plucked the loom like it was a harp. "Knowledge that others do not know, not even Magni. Watch this."

Mud watched. He saw a fleet of the same ships he had seen on Rainbow Isle. He saw the megaphones they had constructed, iron beasts that echoed the dragon roars until they became unbearable. He saw the Gronckles trapped inside each ship. He saw the Outcasts and Hysterics piling rainbow crystals into storerooms. And he saw the man who had drained him, planning with another bearded over a map, cutting a course into the canvas. With a red pencil they circled an island with a name he didn't recognize. A familiar dragon curled around Alvin, one that Mud had sliced up only a few hours ago.

Mud's insides went cold. The Whispering Death gleamed with metal stitches and malice Alvin had added Harmful to his new belt, fingering the rainbow blade. Harmful would not respond, because the sword had only one master- Mud- but it writhed with fury that would have put Thor's hammer to shame. Mud wished he could feel the same fury, but instead he felt a chilling fear, remembering the thick hand that had nearly covered his entire face and the gripping arms that had thrown him onto the man's back.

"Those Hysterics seem to want the hiccup that saved you," Skold said mildly. "How are you going to return the favor?"

"Heimdall gave you freedom of the rainbows," Verdandi added. "That means, although you cannot survive the Bifrost to Asgard, you would most certainly endure if you traveled through Midgard. How will you use that freedom?"

Mud opened his mouth. Then he stopped.

"I need to be on Midgard to think about that. No ideas are coming here," he said. "If I must wake up, my ladies, I should wake up soon. What will happen if I fail to repay that debt?"

Skold's eyes darkened. She uttered one word.

"_Ragnorak._"

* * *

><p>Pain hit him first, in five different places, balanced with a damp coldness. He almost screamed as he awoke but managed to reduce the sound to a groan. He felt as if his ribs had been banged like thin hammers against gold, and perhaps they had. Sticky gauze covered the injured spots.<p>

Warmth. Heavy, smoky air. Freshly cut herbs. A heavy blanket covering the pain. He wanted to hide under the warmth because if he took it off, the grief would assault him, and the reality of what had happened. He didn't want to believe it had happened, but the bruises told the truth.

His older brother Magni, the beloved son who everyone admired, had sold Mud to mortals so that he had gotten drained. He had helped kill Ivor and broke Nephil's bones in solid rock.

Mud wasn't entirely blameless, however. Because of his carelessness, Nephil had died. Or rather, Nephil had told him to make the sacrifice because they wouldn't have made it. The dragon's bones had been badly broken, and Magni had all but crushed his throat, but in those moments when Fury had clutched them and the noise attacked, Nephil had managed one word that only Mud's sharp ears had picked up.

VODR.

Mud covered his face. "Vodr." The Norse word for "rainbow." Nephil had already known that he wouldn't survive, had felt Mud's desperate, powerless hands as he had tried to heal the dragon, not even thinking of changing into a dragon because he had been so exhausted, so broken.

He tested moving his arms. Thin and weak, like those of a tender sapling's. "Tender" was the best word for it, for the aching wouldn't stop. Peeling off the blanket took effort he didn't have. He hadn't lost consciousness after getting drained and recalled the terrifying sensation of being carried into that darkness, of not being able to produce even a spark of light to save Nephil, of being treated . . . like a load of laundry.

"Good afternoon!" A cheery face greeted him. Mud started backward, yelping in pain as his bruises jostled.

A blond, bearded blacksmith with a bundle of clothes, a handful of herbs, and blocks of ice.

"How did you sleep, lad?"

"All right," Mud answered warily. "Where am I?"

"On the island of Berk, home to the only Dragon Academy in the archipelago and to the only Gobber." He tipped his helmet. "That would be me. And I'm guessing you are 'Mud'."

Breath caught in Mud's throat. He had seen the name "Berk" in Skold's vision.

"Pleased to meet you," he managed. "And the babies?"

"They're getting their portraits done." Gobber started to separate the clothes, trying not to let the ice soak into them. "That blue one Ardis keeps asking for Hiccup to draw her."

"Is Hiccup the skinny one with the brown hair who rides Fury?"

"Right on the first try!" Gobber handed him a green shirt with ridiculously long sleeves. "He's also the chief's son and head of the Dragon Academy."

Mud took the shirt but didn't put it on.

"Thank you," he said, not sure whether he meant, "Thank you for the clothes" or "Thank you for distracting the babies from their grief" or "Thank you for telling me where I am because I realize you're all in danger and now I can repay my debt."

"Not at all. It's what we do on Berk. We look out for each other." Gobber took some cold herbs and strapped them to one of Mud's bruises. He shuddered. "This is good for you; will reduce the swelling."

"Yeah, and I'll be a pudgy icicle," he retorted.

"We could use more of those. You know how you can repay old Gobber, though."

"How?" The wariness returned.

Gobber looked him in the eye. "Why does Thor hate metal?"

He blinked. "What?"

"Why does Thor strike lightning at metal?" Gobber gestured with his hook hand. "Few months back we had serious lightning storms when we put up metal perches for the dragons, and then a giant metal statue of Thor. A few villagers thought Toothless- Hiccup's Night Fury- was to blame. They almost let him drift to sea."

Mud bit his lip. He considered telling him the science behind electrons and the flow of electricity. Skold had educated him on those facts so he could learn to catch and release lightning, and to

explain how Father had restarted his heart as a baby.

But he wasn't with the Norns. He was with mortals on Midgard. Mortals with hook prosthetics.

"Thor doesn't HATE metal," Mud said. "His hammer Mjollnir likes to send energy through the material. Have you ever sledded down a slippery hill in the winter?"

"Aye," Gobber nodded. "Always a thrill for my skivvies."

"It's like that with Mjollnir's lightning and metal. The metal is like a slippery tunnel that Mjollnir enjoys traveling through, over and over again. It likes the thrill and cannot resist, even though Thor tries to stop it and others may get hurt. An array of metal perches sticking out of the ground would have driven Mjollnir crazy with delight."

Gobber seemed to buy this half-truth. He turned away, heard a dragon groaning outside, and went to check on it.

"Besides," Mud added in an undertone, "my father has no power to send lightning to this island even if he DID hate metal. The gods have no power in the Archipelago."

* * *

><p>Half a day ago . . .

"This is power." Alvin clenched and unclenched his fist, marveling at the lightning swirling within it. "Pure, adulterated POWER."

"Not pure," Savage corrected. "If it were pure, the Vanir essence and magic would kill you, and then how would you destroy Berk?"

Alvin patted Savage jovially with the glowing hand; the possessed Outcast winced even though the lightning couldn't hurt him.

"That's why I like having you on my side, Magni, even if you took over my favorite second-in-command." Alvin nodded at the glass bottles attached to his belt. "The water really does the trick, holding the essence for a special occasion. Once I learn how to use it . . ." his voice trailed off with the glee of knowing about what lay beyond the realms.

It was past midnight. They had left Rainbow Isle after stripping the island of its crystals and recovering Woedin's body. Norbert and Alvin had insisted on collecting both the crystals and the body, Norbert especially, and they had sewn up the corpse with metal threads. Then they had surrounded the body with iron wood on Norbert's largest boat, one he had prevented from entering the fray with Gris. Alvin had pulled out the book of runes that he had kept away from Outcast Island.

"This is how we SHOULD have summoned Heluth," Alvin said, and recited the chant. This time his voice held more passion and determination. A bond with a dragon cannot change a mortal for the better, but it can provide emotions that he has never been capable of.

A dragon soul does not look that much different from a mortal one, or

even a Vanir one. The soul is white and transparent and coils around the body, questioning its placement outside the corpse. It also glows in the dead of night, belonging to another world.

Alvin kept on reciting, his tone ordering his dragon to come back and finish the fight. The ironwood shook, and no one could tell if it were the gods trying to call back the lost soul or a chilly night breeze.

Woedin woke with a start. He stretched himself and noticed the stitches that mixed with spines. Yet, as he chased his tail and the strange stitches, there was finality to his actions.

Alvin didn't run and hug him the way Hiccup would hug Toothless, but he did stride forward and stroke him between the spines. Woedin loved that.

"Easy, new friend," he said in a soft voice. "You've been away on a long journey."

"We done it!" Norbert shouted with glee. "Victory over death!"

"Victory over death!" The other Hysterics shouted, swinging their axes. Some of the Outcasts took up the cry, but not many. Their dragons gave celebratory squawks at seeing one of their own.

Alvin scratched Woedin in a Whispering Death's favorite places as the dragon tested his stitches. Savage watched with cold eyes. The same look he had worn when seeing his brother call for help. Alvin hadn't made the process painless either; he had wanted Modi to suffer for having killed Woedin, even if Modi had apologized. The suffering had happened, and Modi's green eyes had clouded with dizziness. He hadn't fainted, however. Alvin had kept his iron grip and slung the changeling over his shoulder. They had left Woedin behind, since neither could carry a large Whispering Death.

"Why?" Modi had moaned with a betrayed, anguished tone. The changeling had hung from Alvin's back like a limp carrot, not even finding the strength to struggle. "WHY?"

He could have been asking many things: why had Magni allowed him to get drained, why Alvin had targeted him, why Magni was slowly killing his cousin Nephil.

"Because you gave the dragons powers they do not deserve," Magni had answered with Savage's voice, filled with arrogance and ignoring the look of betray. "And because runts like your cousin need to be culled."

Why couldn't he forget the hurt look in Modi's eyes, focused on the baby dragon whose movements grew fainter in the solid rock? The sheer belief in Magni's good nature, in that the older brother was the apple of everyone's eye? Modi had tried to KILL him when they were younger; granted, Modi kept claiming that the big crater was an accident, but no one had believed him. Magni's mother had made sure of that.

Modi had said something else, something Magni hadn't understood: "my god, my god, why have you forsaken me?" What was the changeling

referring to? To Magni, or to the gods unable to act in the Archipelago? Or another obscure reference?

Woedin let off a rattling screech and took in Magni's expression, worn on Savage's face.

"Everything all right, Magni?" Alvin asked. "You seem troubled?"

He shook off the troubled expression and asked a more troubling question.

"Why do you want the changeling alive? He's a runt, and runts don't deserve to live."

"Runts are useful little creatures," Alvin explained. "Your brother's only going to regain his power. Besides, you can't kill a child who's destined to rebuild a destroyed world. That only leads to a downfall."

He offered a blunt nod. "You are a wise man, Alvin of Outcast Island."

"I couldn't agree more," the larger man chuckled.

12. Chapter Eleven

Ardis swiveled so that Hiccup could sketch her back. He brushed the page lightly with charcoal to mark her scales. Amazing that she was the only sibling of the bunch who was of pure color, except for Nephil and Toothless-

"Hiccup, careful," Astrid said as the charcoal scratched. "You don't want to mess up her form."

INDEED, Ardis purred; the sun bounced off her scales like rippling gold.

Einar and Helgi watched in the Academy shade with mild, sulky disinterest. Gunhild had draped herself around Meatlug and Fishlegs, reading the Book of Dragons over his shoulder. He wasn't comfortable with the extra weight, but she wouldn't unwrap her scaly body from his shoulders.

THIS IS FASCINATING, she said. YOU HAVE SO MANY PICTURES AND RUNES OF DRAGONS. I COULD READ THIS ALL DAY.

"So could I." Fishlegs gave her a wincing smile. "Don't you want your picture drawn too, Gunhild?"

NO. I'D RATHER READ. THE RUNES ARE SO FASCINATING, AND WE DON'T HAVE BOOKS ON RAINBOW ISLE.

"Believe me, you're not missing much." Tuffnut and Ruffnut had collapsed into a pile of boredom. They cracked nuts against each others helmets and munched them lazily.

Hiccup looked up. "I thought Mud told you a lot of adventure stories."

Ardis lay down, attempting to imitate a woman in repose. She spread her wings so they could soak in the sun.

MUD DOESN'T READ FROM BOOKS, she said in a bored tone. HE REMEMBERS ALL THE STORIES HE'S LEARNED FROM THE NORNS. IT'S ALL UP HERE. She tapped a pointed wing to her head.

"The Norns!" Fishlegs looked up, startled. "You mean the three maidens who determine our fate and-"

EXACTLY, Gunhild tightened her hold around his neck. BUT MUD DOESN'T LIKE TO TALK ABOUT ASGARD, OR THE NORNS.

"But- the Norns know everything!" Fishlegs couldn't stop himself. "And Mud learned from_them_?"

ARDIS, WHY CAN'T YOU KEEP YOUR BIG MOUTH SHUT? Einar asked. NOW YOU'VE MADE THE NICE HUMANS CURIOUS.

WELL, YOU WEREN'T ANSWERING THEIR QUESTIONS, Ardis responded.

"I think I've finished your third drawing, Ardis." Hiccup flipped the charcoaled page to show her a black and white likeness. "Does anyone else want to go?"

WE'RE GOOD, Einar said. HICCUP GOT A NICE DRAWING OF US WITH FURY.

Toothless agreed by nodding his head warily. He had apparently not been prepared for dealing with the babies, who had dove in the morning current with the surprised fishermen to help with the morning catch, and they had shown themselves as promising swimmers. Not that Bucket and Mulch had needed their help; dozens of schools of cod and salmon had appeared and practically offered themselves up for devouring.

"They're eating the large dragon's corpse," Mulch had said as Einar had sniffed his prosthetic. "They just feast their wee guts out and don't fear the nets or dragons."

That wasn't the only sign of prosper; edible flowers had sprung up where Ivor's blood had soaked the soil, five-petaled red and yellow flowers that families picked by the bushel. Still more sprouted, and no boots or dragon claws could trample them.

"Eos must be happy with how we're celebrating her," Bucket had said cheerfully. "I should make her a painting."

Hiccup had almost forgotten that it was Eos Week, and Eos Week was almost over. He and his friends hadn't had time to pick themselves lunch, however, although the dragons had enjoyed the extra cod. They had had to round up the babies, whom the villagers observed with surprise and curiosity, and bring them to the Academy. Einar and Helgi had been disappointed to learn that most dragons hated riders with weapons and distrusted any human with a sharp object.

OUR BRETHREN SEEMS KEEN ON IGNORING POTENTIAL FOR REPTILE GLORY, Helgi had said morosely, although he had enjoyed the twins' Zippleback firing at them. To distract the brothers, Hiccup had started on flying lessons. All four babies had gotten involved,

wanting to taste the wind zooming into their tongues.

Toothless, by showing his siblings the poses that his wings struck, got them started on the basics for letting the wind carry them. Helgi and Einar had climbed to the higher parts of the Academy and fallen, flapping. Although the others had cried out in alarm, Gunhild had explained that this was how fledglings learned.

WE FALL SO WE CAN RISE, she had said, taking another magnificent leap. AND SO WE KNOW HOW TO LAND.

Ardis had won Snotlout over with a graceful swan dive, spreading her wings the way Toothless's did when hovering softly. He had watched the blue dragon with admiration, seeing strength in her curved limbs. Hookfang had lit Snotlout on fire a few times to remind him who his real rider was, but even the Nightmare was taken with the fledgling.

When the babies had tired, nuzzling against Toothless for a scaly pillow, it had come to Hiccup's mind to sketch them while telling them adventure stories of Berk. The babies were especially interested in how he and Toothless had used the cloud cover on Dragon Island as cover for their fire, and how the Green Death had exploded with Toothless's fire. Gunhild and Ardis had demonstrated that they could imitate voices of different ladies, which had impressed Fishlegs and even Tuffnut. They listened to several arias, some in dragons screeches and some in tongues they barely recognized.

Back in the present, Fishlegs continued to sputter about the Norns, and Hiccup felt suspicious again.

"Gunhild, why doesn't Mud want to talk about Asgard, or who he is?" Hiccup asked. Astrid tensed beside him. "Heimdall seems to like him, and the Norns must."

IT'S A LONG, LONG, LONG STORY, Gunhild said. WE ONLY KNOW BITS OF IT, WHAT OUR MOTHER TOLD US, AND A FEW DETAILS THAT SLIPPED PAST MUD. BUT THE UPSHOT IS THAT MUD ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE OTHER VANIR, NORNS EXCEPTED. HE CAN'T LIFT A HAMMER LIKE MJOLLNIR OR THROW AN AXE, AND NOW HE CAN'T EVEN WIELD HIS SWORD HARMFUL, FOR IT HAS BEEN STOLEN. RUNTS ARE NOT TREATED KINDLY IN ASGARD.

A somber mood split over the group.

"Sounds a lot like Hiccup during a dragon raid," Snotlout remarked.

Hiccup shot him a look. "Who exactly is Mud's mother?" he tried to ask casually.

OUR AUNT OYSTER, they all responded simultaneously.

"Oyster? Is that her actual name?"

I THINK SO, Gunhild said. SHE WAS A DRAGON TURNED VANIR MAIDEN-

"Hiccup, there you are!" Gobber strode in, cheerful as ever. "Have you seen Mud?"

Hiccup closed the notebook of dragon sketches. Gunhild looked surprised, jolted out of her narration.

MUD SHOULDN'T BE AWAKE, she said. HE HASN'T RECOVERED.

"Well he has gotten up and sneaked out," Gobber responded. "It's just your dad told me to keep an eye on him till he wakes and people were in the smithy trying to get a look at him-

All the babies stood upright. Hiccup and Toothless also became alert.

WE'VE BEEN SELFISH, Ardis said. WE LEFT HIM ALONE TO FACE THE MORTALS.

MUD LIKES BEING ALONE, Helgi reminded her. AND WE THOUGHT HE WOULD SLEEP FOR DAYS TO REGAIN HIS ESSENCE.

"But he doesn't know a thing about Berk or its terrain," Hiccup muttered, flipping through the sketches. Toothless trying to adjust the babies' weight as they curled against him, Ardis lying in the sun, Helgi and Einar pantomining a sword duel. Gunhild's wings spread for flight. "He could be lost."

MUD WILL BE FINE, Gunhild said. HEIMDALL'S WATCHING FOR HIM.

JUST LIKE HEIMDALL WAS WATCHING FOR NEPHIL, Einar remarked sarcastically.

Gunhild gave him a sharp look. Einar withdrew into his red wings, abashed.

"Can't we just search for him?" Astrid asked. She moved to hop onto Stormfly. "It can't be hard to find the smallest boy on the island, not if the dragons have good whiff of him."

Ardis screeched in alarm. All the babies crowded around Hiccup, shaking their head. They couldn't stop the twins from taking off, however, cackling and concocting plans for training the dragon boy.

NOT A GOOD IDEA! Helgi called after them. MUD WOULD HATE THAT.

"He won't hate it once we show all the wood in the village he can explode." Tuffnut had rubbed his hands together as they took off.

"I'll go after them," Astrid sighed. Stormfly shot after the twins like a glittering arrow.

IT'S NOTHING PERSONAL, BUT MUD PROBABLY WON'T WANT TO BE FOUND, Gunhild told Hiccup. She curled around his knees like an over-sized kitten. HE HAD A BAD EXPERIENCE WITH OLDER KIDS ON ASGARD. HE DOESN'T LIKE PEOPLE BECAUSE OF THAT.

"But we helped him," Hiccup said slowly. "We saved him and you."

YOU SAVED OUR BIG BROTHER FURY FROM DEATH, AND IT TOOK A WHILE FOR HIM TO LIKE YOU, Gunhild said. YOU NEED TO BE PATIENT.

Hiccup took a deep breath. He closed the book. This was going to be harder than he thought, getting a brown Night Fury to trust him, if his suspicions were correct. As if reinforce that frustration, the rune stone buzzed angrily against his chest.

"Then what should we do?" he asked. "What will it take for him to trust us?"

Gunhild peered in his eyes, full of sincerity and frustration.

IT WILL TAKE TIME.

Those words seemed to mollify the rune stone. It stopped buzzing, and Hiccup rubbed it.

"I really hope you find another host to protect," he muttered.

* * *

><p>Mud staggered to the water with four legs and collapsed, panting. Despite having a durable reptilian form, he ached all over, had bruises painted all over his shoulders. He wanted nothing more than his old body back, the body that could take several punches.<p>

As a dragon, had been careful to leave no trail; the freedom of the rainbows had helped. Even though he could barely summon a spark of light between his fingers, he could at least bend the sun's rays around him so that they only reflected the trees and village. A good thing, for when the mortals had caught wind of what had happened the night before, they had wanted to see the mysterious boy from Rainbow Isle. While Gobber had distracted them, he had bent the light in the forge and slipped out. Then, as the crowd had gathered around the blacksmith, Mud had closed his eyes and changed. That had never happened before.

It was easier to be a dragon now, actually, without the Vanir essence to distract him. It was as if those two parts of himself had been fighting, while the mortal part was all too willing to compromise with the dragon side. Mum must have had this problem as a Vanir maiden, although she never talked about that, or about her time on Midgard. Pity about both, actually; Mud could have learned how to talk to mortals.

He changed back now, soaking in the lake and aching all over. An over-sized fur vest dragged over his drenched knees. He hadn't taken the shirt because he could smell Hiccup's skin soaked into it, and instinct told him that the skinny one wouldn't want his clothes being taken. Besides, clothes were difficult to change with skin, and the pants had been bad enough. It's like the rough cloth had been slipped under his skin and chafed at his blood vessels.

He had smelled Ivor's blood, followed the copper-brown stain to the water in the cove. The only time he had stopped was to watch the babies learn to fly. An ache had grown in his chest like a tooth cavity, and he had stood in the shade of a tree he would have climbed only two days before. Now to even think of reaching for the branches made his muscles groan.

Fear, an old primal fear, especially with the destructive blond heads, had made him leave. He didn't like kids, and he wasn't going

to answer their countless questions or summon lightning for them.

A brown mist swirled around his form. He stopped bending the light and let the mist solidify around him.

MUD. MUDDY. Ivor's soul, tethered to the lake. In cloud form it wrapped around Mud, giving him a dragon cuddle.

"Uncle," he responded with affectionate despair, wrapping his arms around the white shapes. It went into him, essence that Ivor had taken from him inadvertently, for the Green Death's children naturally absorbed the magic around them. It was in the blood.

IF YOU ARE HEARING ME, KNOW THAT I AM DEAD, THAT I HAVE LOST THE BATTLE.

Of course. What remained of Ivor's soul would be a black and white photocopy, his reflection pressed into colorless essence. Despite himself, Mud felt the tears slide down his cheeks. He wiped with a red fist and listened.

IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT. THE RUNE STONE WORKED, BUT THE CORD . . .

He slapped a hand to his forehead. The cord! Why hadn't he gotten something stronger?

I'M SORRY; I LET THEM GET TOO CLOSE. SOME DRAGONS HAVE CHOSEN TO SIDE WITH THE BLOODTHIRSTY MORTALS I WAS MORE CONCERNED WITH THEM THAN WITH MY OWN FLESH AND BLOOD. I HAVE FOUND OTHER MORTALS WHO WILL HELP YOU, GOOD ONES WHO KNOW YOUR FAMILY.

"But I need to help them first," Mud murmured. "And how will I do that?"

Ivor did not respond. He couldn't, being only a white shadow. Instead, he lingered around Mud like a protective cluster of clouds, shielding him from the twins and Astrid, who soared above and shouted.

Mud took a deep breath and dove under the water. The magic followed him, bits of his essence. It wasn't enough, not enough to summon lightning, but it meant that he wasn't entirely helpless. There was hope to do what the Norns wanted, what HE wanted.

He had freedom of the rainbows, a village to protect, and a debt to repay. He closed his eyes and saw what the rainbow crystals on the Outcast and Hysterics witnessed. They showed him each ship's solid blueprint, the Gronckles trapped in the boiler rooms, spitting coal to make steam. He winced at what HARMFUL was suffering, locked in an ironwood scabbard. Sensing Mud, Harmful protested to him with flashes of bright orange, but the Outcast only laughed at the brightly colored sword.

I'll get you out, Mud promised. Bubbles left his pressed lips.

A plan sprouted in his mind. He surfaced for air and sat in the lake. Ivor's remaining essence dissolved, leaving him shivering in the evening air. His hair clung to his scalp, and goosebumps bloomed like dandelions.

* * *

><p>Astrid saw him coming. She was feeding Stormfly in the stables. He approached warily and limped, hugging a soaked vest to his small frame. One of Hiccup's spare vests. He held several sticks that smelled spicy.<p>

"Where were you?" she asked.

"In the woods." Mud handed her the sticks. "Here. I grew them. Cinnamon makes the chicken taste better."

She took the cinnamon and sniffed them. Stormfly took a stick between her lips, swallowed it, and began hacking. Mud groaned.

"You're supposed to grind a little into powder and sprinkle it." He winced at Stormfly's splutters. "That was not supposed to happen. Lady Blue, get some water."

The Nadder obeyed, sinking its head into a water trough. Astrid surveyed Mud.

"Her name's Stormfly, though I guess she likes Lady Blue. Hiccup wants to make you part of the group," she said. "He doesn't want you to think you're alone."

"I'm not alone," he responded. "I have my cousins here and in Asgard, and I have my mum. At least . . ." he looked down. "I have my mum back in the Underworld."

"The Underworld? Your mother's dead?"

"Yes," he answered shortly. "But I can still hug her in the Underworld, and she's not that cold. She's never been cold."

Astrid didn't pursue the question she was obviously thinking, which gave him an opening.

"I came here to ask for your help. You don't have to give it. A fleet of Outcasts and Hysterics are coming to Berk, about five to six ships each a quarter size of one of the outer islands."

She moved towards Stormfly, who removed her head from the trough. "We need to tell the chief, then!"

"Astrid, the fleet must never reach Berk. They've got all sorts of inventions for dealing with your dragons and fighting style, but they are sailing from Rainbow Isle with a larger load." His face lit up despite remaining serious. "Besides, you're all good mortals. You shouldn't have casualties."

She eyed his face.

"I need you because I can't fly in Night Fury form, and you obviously don't want Stormfly in another rider's hands." He paused. "If you help me, there won't be any battle on Berk, and Hiccup will be safe. Will you do it, at least for him?"

Astrid placed a protective hand on Stormfly's wet snout. "When do we take off?"

13. Chapter Twelve

Astrid would have flown to Stoick, after humoring Mud and then flying to the chief's hut. He'd be sleeping, but Stoick would call the village to arms and man a proactive defense. Then conflict would be averted, Hiccup would be safe, and everyone would be happy.

Something in Mud's eyes stopped her from ratting. She had seen that look on a different face, tempered with less wariness and pain. His bruises marked their previous meeting, when she hadn't trusted him. He was still limping but refused to acknowledge his pain. She had a feeling that if she broke his trust, that he would disappear forever.

I'm sorry, Hiccup, she thought.

He explained his idea in short sentences as they flew to the rainbow crystal lodged into the cliff, and she had to admit it was a cautious plan, if a crazy one.

"But do you think sabotaging the boats will stop Alvin and Norbert from reaching Berk?" she asked as they landed.

"They won't have a choice but to halt the invasion," he said, making an effort to not grab her for support. His legs locked around Stormfly's saddle, and he clung to it with tiny fingers. The wind tousled his hair. "The side lever engines- the machines they're using to power the ships- are too big and heavy to replace in time for combat, even if they have a team of mechanics, and they need the dragons to fire up the steam. If they have to rebuild their bloody dragon army, they're going to need time. If we get their devices to Hiccup, your village can reverse-engineer the devices and use them for self-defense in time for a future invasion."

"What's reverse-engineer?"

He leaned back. "Basically, take an invention apart to figure out how it works and then build a duplicate of it. It will become a common practice in the future, but I'm guessing you don't do it now."

"Well, Alvin WAS trying to learn how to train dragons, but training isn't the same as building something."

Mud snorted. "Indeed it isn't."

The crystal gleamed in the darkness. Gunhild and the babies were waiting for them. Mud leaped off and bent over, doubled in pain, and they tackled him.

MUD! They all cried. Immediately, as he lay on the hard rock, they started to lick the bruises. The tongues must have tickled; accented laughter burst from Mud's thin lips, along with gasps as the saliva worked its way through the damaged skin.

WE SMELLED YOU BUT WAITED FOR THE SKINNY ONE TO SLEEP, Einar explained between licks. HE WAS ASKING ABOUT YOUR MOTHER AND

FATHER.

WERE YOU PLANNING TO LEAVE WITHOUT US? Gunhild asked, eyeing Astrid.

"Just to repay a debt-" Mud giggled as three tongues tickled at his bruises.

WE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING IMPORTANT, Ardis said solemnly. FROM NOW ON, WE'RE NOT LEAVING YOU ALONE.

Mud sat up. The dragons moved back to give him space. "It's dangerous. I can't let you get killed."

NEPHIL DIED BECAUSE WE LET YOU OUT OF OUR SIGHT, Ardis said.

He stroked her solemn head. "No. He died because my brother likes culling runts."

I KNEW IT! Gunhild cried. I KNEW IT WAS HIM!

FINE, YOU WERE RIGHT, Ardis conceded. Her tail curled with displeasure.

"Your brother?" Astrid's voice grew sharply. "The thing that was controlling Savage is your _brother_?!"

"Half-brother," Mud remarked grimly, still stroking. "He and I have different mums. _His_ is a real b-"

MUD! Gunhild chided him. SHOW SOME RESPECT!

"Sorry."

Astrid couldn't believe it. "Then-"

"He thinks I'm not a man of Asgard." Mud got to his feet. "I can't let you come, cousins. It would be easier, but-"

WE NEED TO STAY TOGETHER, Ardis said stubbornly. YOUR BROTHER IS GOING TO BE ON THAT SHIP.

"ONE of the ships," Mud corrected. "And we are most definitely NOT heading that one. Not with the bearded man who stole my essence." He shivered.

MUD, YOU MAY HAVE VOWED TO NEVER HARM YOUR BROTHER, Einar said, BUT **WE **HAVEN'T. AND HE BETRAYED YOU.

"We are not seeking revenge," Mud said flatly. "We are repaying a debt. Either you agree to not be stupid, or you stay."

Helgi and Einar looked at one another; they scowled with pointed teeth. Mud's voice grew softer.

"Look, I know Magni started a blood feud. He killed Nephil for no reason. But we have to protect these people first. And I have to protect you, since your mother's in Asgard."

The dragons still looked sullen.

"And I'll read you TWO adventure stories tomorrow if you can hold your blood lust for this battle."

INIGO MONTROYA? Helgi asked eagerly.

"Inigo Montoya," Mud promised. "And Robin Hood."

The dragons offered their heads for him to pat. He scratched the tops of their heads

YOU'VE GOT A DEAL, they said at the same time.

* * *

><p>The Outcast guard wasn't worried. He was inside the ship's engine room, watching the Gronckles spit coal into the side-lever engines, watched the cogs go. Although it was a Hysteric invention-which made it nutty as a fruitcake by association- the sound of steam whistling and ever-present sweat relaxed him. It gave him structure in life. The light from the glass-covered lanterns also relaxed him.<p>

He was standing with bent knees, a flask to his lips. The boss had gotten a little nuts after Rainbow Isle, resurrecting the dragon, but the guard could deal with crazy. He pitied the other Outcast who reported a megaphone vanishing. Hysterics liked keeping inventory, and one missing weapon drove them to chasing the Outcast up and down the various decks.

The music came faintly, hitting his ears. Making the Gronckles stop spitting coal, it was a lady's voice, soft and tender, longing:

THINK OF ME, THINK OF MY FONDLY

WHEN WE HAVE SAID GOOD-BYE

REMEMBER ME, ONCE IN A WHILE

PLEASE PROMISE, YOU'LL TRY

Despite instinct and the dragons screeching at him to cover his ears, the guard couldn't. They tried to bar him from leaving, but he knocked them aside. He abandoned his post and walked toward it, slowly, with hesitant steps. Others followed him, with glassy eyes.

THEN YOU'LL FIND, THAT ONCE AGAIN YOU LONG

TO TAKE YOUR HEART BACK AND BE FREE

IF YOU'LL EVER FIND A MOMENT

SPARE A THOUGHT FOR ME

They were a mob, following the voice. Perhaps it was a mermaid, a siren calling for her prey. Perhaps it was the ghost of a woman, like the strange lady they had summoned on Outcast Island.

WE NEVER SAID OUR LOVE WAS EVERGREEN

OR AS UNCHANGING AS THE SEA,
BUT IF YOU STILL CAN REMEMBER
STOP AND THINK OF ME

The crystal room. A redheaded Hysteric, eyes popping with veins, pulled the latch. The hinged door swung open, and colored hues swirled around them. Although the sensible thing would have been to leave, they couldn't. The music and color enveloped them, kept them relaxed.

THINK OF ALL THE THINGS

WE'VE SHARED AND SEEN

DON'T THINK ABOUT THE WAY

THINGS MIGHT HAVE BEEN

When Alvin, Savage and Norbert found them later, huddled in a pile, they were dreaming of ladies swinging among wheat sheaves and chasing pigtailed girls across rainbows. A rude awakening came when they found the noise-making megaphones and several of the ship's engines gone.

So were all the Gronckles and Nadders.

* * *

><p>Mud clutched the megaphone. "I think that did it. Good job, Gunhild. You can uncover your ears, Astrid."<p>

Astrid did so, wincing. "Your singing can put men to sleep?"

OF COURSE. WE ARE KIN TO THE GREEN DEATH. Gunhild beamed as Astrid's horror. I COULD HAVE HAD THEM THROW THEMSELVES OVERBOARD TO FIND IMAGINARY MERMAIDS IF I WISHED.

"No need for that," Mud said softly. "We don't want to attract more attention than necessary."

They hovered among an army of confused dragons, who flapped and fired crazily. Stormfly staggered with the weight of four baby dragons, so they were close to the water. Mud had bent the light from the quarter moon so that they wouldn't be seen, but the dragons could smell them, and they were not giving friendly vibes.

When Gunhild had sung into the megaphone -courtesy of a willing Heimdall- Mud had used the freedom of the rainbows to transfer the sound to the crystals trapped on four of the five ships. They had been only too willing to magnify her imitation of a soothing opera singer and hypnotize the guards into dreamland. Once that had been done, Mud told the crystals to transport themselves, several engines and all the megaphones on the four ships to Berk; he gave them a picture image of the smithy. A third of the crystals did so, taking their drained brethren if black crystals could not move.

"That was the easy part," Mud muttered. "Why aren't the dragons

leaving?"

"They want to protect their riders," Astrid whispered, a sarcastic lilt to her voice. "Must have bonded strongly with the bloodthirsty Outcasts and Hysterics."

Mud placed a hand to his forehead. "Odin help us."

WHY ARE THEY SO STUPID? Einar whispered. At that, all the dragons turned toward them, even though they couldn't see them. The Nadders curled their tails, preparing to shoot blue spines.

AND YOU SAY **I'M **THE ONE WITH THE BIG MOUTH, Ardis said crossly.

LEAVE THIS TO ME, Gunhild said. She drew a deep and gave an ancient command through the megaphone:

DESERT! DESERT!** DESERT**!

It was a shrill cry, and the megaphone made it echo through the skies. Stormfly shook with the command; with a cry, Ardis slipped. Helgi and Einar reached to grab her with their teeth, and she gave another shriek and they staggered to pull her up. Mud dropped the megaphone and grabbed her with two hands. Together, they got her onto a stable place.

"It seems to be working," Astrid called above the echoing screeches. "That's the good news."

"The bad news is that they heard it too," Mud shouted with gritted teeth, pointing to the single ship they hadn't touched.

Two men came onto the deck of the leading ship, one with the Whispering Death. They saw the megaphone hit the water with a crunching splash. Alvin was holding a bottle of water, one that made Mud go rigid, still holding Ardis tightly.

"He's got my essence, and my sword," Mud whispered. "He knows I'm here."

Alvin muttered something that made the water glow, and Mud bit down on his lips. His eyes went glassy, and Astrid could feel his hands shake. She looked down at Alvin's figure with hatred.

Helgi and Einar saw his pain and didn't wait for an order; they jumped off Stormfly, who had ascended close to the clouds. The loss of weight made her swing to the left, and Astrid had to steer her upright. Mud reached for them, but they fell too quickly. Their expressions were determined.

"They'll be killed!" he cried. Setting down Ardis, he also leaped off Stormfly. Amazingly, the fall didn't make him stop shielding Astrid, her dragon and the others; he still bent the light around them. He started changing mid-air, hair turning to scales and nose rounding into a snout.

Helgi and Einar took on twin swan dives and aimed; twenty feet from the water, they fired at Alvin. Astrid had to watch without the help of a spyglass or dragon vision, but she saw enough. One shot hit the

arm with the bottle, the other at his belt. He shrieked and doubled over; the bottle fell to the deck and shattered. Wood smoldered.

NIGHT FURIES NEVER MISS! Einar cried at the top of his lungs, a red blur heading for the sea.

"Harmful!" Mud cried before he became a dragon completely. A flash of rainbow shot from the remains of Alvin's belt, towards the brown Night Fury. He caught it in his teeth at the same time he caught the babies. Rainbow swirled around them, and around Stormfly from above.

COVER YOUR EYES! Gunhild ordered; Astrid was only too happy to obey. She was familiar with the method of transport and felt Stormfly's claws hit Berk. She heard a grunt as Mud, Einar and Helgi crashed.

Mud, human again, lay sprawled on the deserted cliff top. The rainbow sword was cutting his lips; he spat it out. Einar and Helgi crowded around him.

"You two are daft as bats," he said, dazed and still rigid. "Only ONE adventure story tomorrow."

WE GOT YOUR SWORD BACK, Einar pointed out.

YOU GOT SOME ESSENCE BACK AS WELL. IT MUST HAVE CLUNG TO HARMFUL, Helgi said.

Mud groaned and turned over. He spoke with closed eyes and a bleeding mouth.

"We did it, Astrid, we did it. Berk is safe."

Astrid looked to the horizon, where she swore she could see wrecks on the horizon, smoldering and sulking. Stormfly nudged her to offer comfort. Although she could not see Alvin's murderous expression, his pain at being kicked in the man's, well, sensitive spot, she could picture it. He never liked being defeated, especially by those smaller than him.

She said nothing. Her honesty could wait till the morning. The sky thundered above them, as if Magni wanted to strike them with his father's hammer.

14. Chapter Thirteen

The anger that awaited Outcasts and Hysterics shook the remains of their fleet; with no dragons, they had to have the leading boat tow the two that had lost their engines, with Outcasts working to shovel the coal to heat up the steam.

Norbert the Nutjob rattled the deck with angry footsteps, dressed in striped purple pajamas emblazoned with the mysterious blob of a vegetable that no Viking could identify. He also wore a purple nightcap that bobbed with a fluffy tip, one nicked several times by his double-headed axe.

"He has stolen my prized inventions and hypnotized all the Hysterics!" Norbert the Nutjob boomed, swinging his axe. "I shall slice him in two, bring him back to life and kill him again. Victory over death!"

"Victory over death!" The Hysterics repeated. They crowded around the ships with their weapons, blood lust coursing through them like water coursing through rapids.

"Nutty as a fruitcake," Magni muttered through Savage's lips. He only seemed slightly disconcerted at the mention of his younger brother getting maimed. Anger overrode his discomfort, an embarrassed fury that ran through his face.

You could only tell Alvin was angry due to his bristling mustache and clenched hands. Stroking Woedin kept him calm. The dragon curled with pleasure at his bristled touch.

Neither he nor Savage had seen exactly what had happened- only colored blurs falling to the sea, two shooting fire at him- but the missing sword and the shattered glass on the deck had told him what had happened. Modi had sneaked in, somehow floated in the sky, and disabled the ship's offensive weapons for Berk. And Modi had remained unseen.

"Killing him is too merciful, Norbert," he said. "The son of Thor is resilient to a fault. He'll survive anything you throw at him."

"All the better!" Norbert paced the deck, heedless of the broken glass. "We Hysterics love to experiment!"

"We have to get our hands on him first, and on Hiccup," Alvin reminded him. "Outcast Island is closer than Hysteria. Let us set a course for home."

Norbert gave the orders. His men obeyed, but they were jittery. They knew the bobbing nightcap was a bad sign.

Alvin looked at the lightening horizon and set up the ironwood circle. Woedin nudged at some of the blocks, and he pushed the dragon away, gently. The boy had used his fear as a weapon instead of letting it paralyze him for days on end. But Modi was still afraid; Alvin could sense terror within the Vanir essence.

Magni spoke. "The Norns. They told my brother about the invasion. Meddling spinsters."

Alvin nodded. "Did they allow him to control the rainbow crystals as well?"

"Heimdall would have." Magni's voice was flat. "The Guardian of the Bifrost."

Alvin's hand went to the remains of his belt; the fire blasts had turned the iron wood buckles to ash and burnt wood. Thank the gods he had only carried the largest bottle with him; if they had ALL broken, then the invasion of Rainbow Isle would have been for nothing. Still, this was an inconvenience; he had to give the boy credit for slipping in and out unseen.

Another Outcast brought him the book of runes and one of the bottles. It gleamed with protest, the glow struggling to leave. Alvin uncorked the bottle and drank the glowing water. A wicked smile grew across his face as he absorbed the power.

"Modi's going to regret tonight's escapade."

"Surely you're not thinking of summoning him," Magni said. "I have no doubt you can do it, but--"

"Summoning him can wait," Alvin said. "I merely want to make the gods think twice about assisting him."

He flipped through the book till he found the page he wanted. Then he started to reciting, naming the god he wanted to summon. Magni's eyes widened.

"No, not him," Magni said. "It's against destiny--"

Alvin waved him off, and by then he had completed the spell. A figure stood in the ironwood, blinking against the darkness and hostile Vikings. He clutched a horn in one hand and a spear in the other, black cloak billowing against the sea breeze.

"He's not supposed to die until the end of Ragnorak," Magni insisted. "LOKI is the one meant to kill him."

"You're using Modi's power to summon those of Asgard," Heimdall said, watching the pair coolly. "As he would say, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be.'"

Alvin raised a hand; an Outcast threw a rope rubbed in iron wood ash around the figure. Heimdall cut the rope with his spear and stood proudly.

"All of Asgard knows what you did, Magni," he went on, striding the limits of the iron circle. "Whatever your father wanted, it couldn't have been treachery."

Magni's expression darkened. Alvin's arm, blackened with iron wood ash, reached out and grabbed the god by the arm. Heimdall twisted, but essence flowed from him as well, without even the use of this name. His skin started to dissolve into beige mist.

"All of Asgard won't matter once it's gone up in rubble." Alvin reached with the other hand to grab the horn. "And this isn't treachery; it's liberation. What's treacherous is giving Vanir power to a sickly runt."

"Modi is not sickly. He has more right to Vanir strength than you ever will," Heimdall gasped, using his free hand to bring the spear on Alvin's head. Blood splattered the iron wood blocks.

Alvin backed away, arm glowing. Heimdall breathed hard. His left arm had completely vanished, leaving only a red stump of shoulder. He bit his wrinkled lips and swirled his cape around, but the colors that shot from the sky could not penetrate the iron wood circle. They danced around helplessly like red and blue fireflies.

Seeing a one-armed Vanir, the Outcasts and Hysterics drew their

weapons. Norbert was front in line, running a finger along his axe. Magni's mouth was open, and he gaped at Alvin's thrilled grin.

"With the power of the rainbows, you won't be able to protect the runt." Alvin shot his hands toward the sky. He reached for the colored lights and chanted.

The lights did not obey. They evaded his thick fingers and kept pelting themselves at the iron wood barrier. Heimdall gave a pained smile.

"You must think we're daft thugs," he said. "I can hear every insect breathe through its pitiful skin. I see every crawling organism on your land. You think I didn't know what you were planning, to hurt the son of Thor with MY powers? Arrogant fool."

"What did you do?" Alvin hissed, reaching for him. Heimdall blocked him with the spear.

"I ceded my power over the rainbows and gave my position as Guardian of the Bifrost to a good friend." Heimdall nodded at Alvin's shock. "Odin approved, after I agreed to lend him my eyes for this occasion. He sees everything that I cannot see right now."

"What?" Magni's voice rose.

And as Alvin looked, he saw that each of Heimdall's eyes contained the shape of a raven, of a hooded figure with a spear.

The elderly god was facing them BLIND.

"You will never use the rainbows." Heimdall brought the spear to his stomach. "And I will not die by the hands of mortals."

Alvin reached forward, but the spear already went through. Heimdall gasped and slumped, dead instantly. The Outcasts and Hysterics roared with disapproval.

"This wasn't supposed to happen!" Magni was panicked. "We've disrupted destiny."

Alvin, shaken himself, patted Magni with stained fingers. "We didn't do a thing, son. He did that to himself. No Valhalla for suicide cases."

"But Odin knows. Odin knows for certain!" Magni stood around. "This wasn't supposed to happen! Heimdall is one of the old gods, a respected Vanir!"

"He won't be respected for killing himself," Alvin responded dryly. "Not to save your runt of a brother."

He reached for the horn, which had crashed to the deck. Heimdall was to blow it to signal Ragnorak, the end of the old world. Again the rainbow lights tried to summon it, to at least salvage some bit of tradition. Alvin's fingertips, still stained with iron wood ash, blocked them. He pressed his lips to the mouth and blew.

A discordant horn sounded through the sea. It made the clouds shake and the waves ripple. Every man on board, even Norbert, felt their

legs quiver like Snoggletog jelly. Magni stared at Heimdall's corpse with an expression of denial and horror.

"Ragnorak has begun," Alvin said.

* * *

><p>Gris watched from the Bifrost, gallon-sized tears rolling from her yellow eyes. Her torn wings were wrapped in bandages, and she leaned to one side with a groan. Yet she remained alert, with her new position as Guardian. Heimdall's black cloak- he had worn the tan one for his final trip- draped over her back like a towel.<p>

Several times her claws shot into the bridge, attempting to bring Heimdall to safety, but the ironwood blocked every gleam. She screeched in frustration and in pain as she pulled at her wings. Her hope had died when he had stabbed his stomach with the spear.

"Now do you believe us?" she told the blond bearded man next to her. "Do you see what your favored son has done to Asgard, to your other son, and to my little Nephil?"

Thor watched. His expression was indifference battling with rage, frustration, and guilt.

The dragon towered over him, a mountain of grief and anger.

"How many more will pay for your blindness and arrogance, son of Odin?"

* * *

><p>Eos reeled from within the iron wood circle. She had freedom of the Loki trees, and that gave her eyes and ears all over this place, which she now knew was called Outcast Island. With name came memories, memories of slaying dragons, of befriending the smelly old man who had saved her from sickness, of two bearded men who pined for her, of her mortal son.<p>

Gods, her SON. Every time she closed her eyes, ever since that phone call to Stoick, she could picture his brown hair and bright eyes, ones he had inherited from her. Her arms longed to hold him the way they had held Mud. She was starting to worry about him again, wonder if he had ever grown.

She was getting tethered her old Midgard life, and that was a bad thing. Her mortal son had been on this island, been shackled and tricked into betraying his tribe. The Loki trees had seen, had been cut and grounded to powder to trick her son.

She saw who had betrayed him, tending cabbages on a remote cliff. Her heart shattered, and more memories surged through her. She lashed out, not thinking.

Goddess of fertility, meet stumpy cabbage roots. Feel the roots, make them grow. Use them to wrap around the old man's ankles and snap them. Use the leaves to carry her voice, to ask WHY. He had saved her life so many years ago; why manipulate her child? Every time he croaked an answer, looking around for a voice he barely recognized, she used the roots to slam him back and forth, pounding him into the

rock.

Her rage faded. She let go of the roots. They lay limp on the barren ground. So did he, with broken bones and a bleeding face. A sheep nudged him.

Eos returned to herself. Still trapped in the iron wood circle, but changed from the Midgard memories. She felt her body and found that it had grown in height and breadth. Armor instead of a flower dress, a breastplate and sword at her side. Long blond hair plaited into a braid. A helmet adorning the top of her face.

She buried her face in her hands, letting the transparent sword fall. As Mud would have quoted, "An eye for an eye, the world goes blind."

The old man wasn't dead, but he would be. Soon. Because of her.

* * *

><p>Hiccup woke with a feeling of discontent. having dreamed of a horn that tore mountains apart and set the sky on fire. He looked to where the babies huddled beside Toothless, only to find them gone. Toothless was sniffing the bare rock for them. Astrid's voice from downstairs.<p>

"No, I haven't seen him since last night, sir. But I thought you ought to know what we did, and what Alvin had been planning."

He shot straight out of bed. Toothless followed him downstairs. He saw his father whittling furiously, a trio of three women's faces already adorning the corners of the room. Gobber was leaning from leg to peg leg, rubbing hand and hook together with frustration.

"What was Alvin planning? And where are the babies?" he asked.

"To invade Berk," Astrid said without emotion. "Mud, the babies and I went to stop him. Invasion averted, Hysterics disarmed."

"And the smithy's filled with Hysteric weapons." Gobber raised his hook hand. "With a note, but still! Astrid, why didn't you tell us what you were planning?"

"Yeah, why didn't you?" Hiccup asked, a rough edge to his voice. He noted the circles under her eyes.

Astrid came towards him. He looked at her and rubbed his eyes, still partly asleep.

"Let me tell you along the way. I know where Mud and the babies are."

15. Chapter Fourteen

Normally soaring over the village put Hiccup in a good mood. Nothing thrills a young dragon trainer like the rush of morning air combined with golden rays of sunlight. Astrid's account of what had happened the previous night, however, along with Gobber's complaints about the clutter of weapons in the smithy, had pressed a hurt, betrayed

expression onto Hiccup's face. Toothless seemed to feel the same way, given how he glared at the approaching cliffs.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," Hiccup said as they sailed over the Academy. "Why didn't you?"

Astrid didn't look away. She studied his face, trying to find an appropriate answer to his question.

"You could've been killed, Astrid, or taken as a hostage! Alvin already did that to you twice."

"He didn't see us," Astrid said softly. "He only sensed Mud."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?" Hiccup clenched his hand into a fist and nudged too hard. He and Toothless shot upward, and he had to lower the dragon. Toothless slapped him with his ear. "Alvin's after him, Astrid, I know it. But how can we help a dragon-boy who also happens to be an unknown god if he doesn't trust us?"

"He trusts me," she remarked.

Hiccup slumped forward, the hurt growing on his face.

"Is this another competition, Astrid? Who can earn a god's trust first?"

"No." Astrid's expression softened as she straightened her back. "Hiccup, we can't discuss this while flying. Let's land."

They stopped at a field of grass. After landing, Toothless shook out his tail and stalked from Hiccup, finding a patch of dragon nip.

"Great, now my dragon hates me," he said, collapsing onto the grass. She sat down next to him, stroking the rune stone covered by his shirt. Stormfly went to join Toothless and snag blades of nip.

"Hiccup, you're not doing anything wrong. This isn't a typical dragon you have to train; this is a boy. A boy with serious trust issues, and I wouldn't blame him, given his brother is helping the Outcasts."

He shot up. "What?"

"Magni, the son of Thor, is Mud's brother," she repeated. "Their father is Thor, the god of lightning and thunder. And he's taken over Savage, betrayed Mud to Alvin, and helped the Outcasts and Hysterics take down Rainbow Isle."

Hiccup clapped two hands to his knees. "You're serious?"

"Mud said that Savage's soul has slowly disintegrated over the past few days, since Magni possessed him." Astrid kept her voice steady. "We see is Magni acting through his body. There isn't anything left of Savage, not even a shred of soul."

Hiccup was tempted to say, "It's a good thing he was a bloodthirsty

Outcast then and not a nice Viking," but he saw the serious look on Astrid's face. She said the thoughts passing through his head.

"It's not that I like Savage, given he works for Alvin and was going to kill me when I pretended to be Heather, but without a soul you can't even go to the Underworld or Valhalla. I wouldn't even wish that fate on Alvin."

Hiccup placed a shaking hand on the grass. He hid his thoughts because he WOULD wish that fate on Alvin without a second thought.

"That was Mud's older brother? A god who will destroy a man's soul with no regard for the consequences? And Thor approved?"

Astrid nodded.

"Gods." Hiccup ran his fingers through the moist blades pressed against his side. "That puts a hole through my theory."

"What theory?"

He spoke more softly. "My dad's been acting strange around Mud; I was thinking that one of the Norse goddesses took a liking for my dad, seduced him one night--"

She punched him in the arm.

"Ow! Astrid!"

"Hiccup," she said sternly, "don't even think about that possibility. We aren't Greeks, after all, and we don't have Greek Gods. Vikings have better manners."

He rubbed the sore spot. "Then why is my dad so concerned about Mud? It's not just because he's a god, because then Mud would be getting the royal treatment and probably the best rooms in Berk. Why is my dad treating him like he's family?"

That's when she understood. Hiccup liked solving problems; he had developed a gift for making peace on Berk by using logical solutions. The problem was that logic and the supernatural didn't mix. And in this case, they collided head-on.

She rubbed his sore arm.

"We don't know who Mud's mother is; maybe that's the answer."

"Yeah." He stood up. "It shouldn't be too hard to identify a goddess named 'Aunt Oyster'. But at least we know who he is now." He walked toward Toothless.

"Wait, you know?" She staggered to follow.

"Fishlegs told me about Magni and Modi," Hiccup replied, patting Toothless to placate him "the sons of Thor destined to rebuild the world after Ragnarok."

They mounted their dragons. Hiccup kept muttering words, toying with

them.

"Mud, Modi; not much difference between the two. Why didn't I think of it before? Maybe it's the same with Aunt Oyster."

They took to the skies.

"Odin, Osteiche, Aunt Oyster, Oy-Esther. Ee-Esther." Hiccup's eyes widened, and he nearly made Toothless shoot up in the air again.

"Gods, they weren't saying Oyster, they were saying Easter!"

"Easter?"

"It's another name for Eos." Hiccup leaned forward furiously. "Mud's mother is the goddess of fertility! We've named a week for her!"

"Hiccup! You don't know where Mud is!"

He came to a stop and hovered, a sheepish expression on his face. Astrid took the lead with Stormfly, heading to the rockier cliffs on Berk. In time they heard the clanging of steel.

* * *

><p>Things had changed on Outcast Island. They had found Mildew, broken and battered across the small cabbage patch he had cultivated. Fungus had alerted them, bleating and running in circles; it was a miracle that the sheep had escaped the angry plants. The air was filled with spores, pouring from the Loki trees like rice from a brown sack. The Outcasts and Hysterics breathed them in, choking. Norbert was the only one with sense to cover his mouth, using the nightcap as a mask. Not that he was any less crazy.<p>

Random fact about Loki trees: they are technically not "trees" by a twentieth century scientist's definition. They are actually a form of primitive lichen, interconnected by an underground network of roots. During alternation of generations, their form of reproduction, they release black spores that contain either male or female halves. You can view this process with flat moss, but Loki trees were the only form of "moss" that grew to tree status in the Archipelago.

The spores, a result of alternation of generations, would have fascinated the modern botanists: among their property to contain only half the usual amount of chromosomes, anyone who inhales them is compelled to tell the truth until the spores pass through their system.

Loki DID have a sense of humor. Eos hadn't released the spores for a joke, however. She had saved them for Alvin the Treacherous, once finding out how he had learned to ride dragons.

* * *

><p>Alvin stomped into the chamber, coughing from the spores. Boris the guard backed away, but he still got shoved into the wall. The woman imprisoned in the iron wood had turned into a Viking shield-maiden, large and buxom with a sword. Her usual expression of wounded indifference had become pure hatred, twin green eyes pointed

like emerald lances.<p>

He stopped and coughed, recognition interrupting his anger. In that moment, her eyes darted to the horn dangling from his belt, and the bottles. Fear battled the hatred, mixed with it. She brandished a sword half her size.

"What did you do you them?" she demanded, eyes on the bottles.

He didn't answer, still coughing. Too much recognition, as if he finally saw the ghost he had identified so many days ago.

"I forgot how beautiful you were, the most coveted girl on Berk," he said, the soft tone masking his threatening anger. "And how dangerous you were when we fought that day."

"What did you do to them?" She came to the edge of the iron wood pentagram. Her sword came out.

"I might as well ask you the same." He jabbed a finger at her bare feet, where dandelions sprouted. "He was barely alive, and with all those broken bones, there was no point in bringing him back from the Underworld. I had to slit his throat to end his pain. You know how hard it is to find smart Vikings these days who deliver?"

Her response was a poisonous glare. He came closer now, the bottles and horn more prominent. She opened her mouth to breathe the spores that would control his mind.

"And you gave yourself away, Eos." He bent to scratch runes on an iron wood stake. "Only one goddess can control the cabbages like that, and it's not Freya. I should have realized it before."

She flinched, choking on the spores she was about to exhale. He straightened from the first stake and moved to the next.

"I wasn't going to kill either of your sons," he said casually, "not yet. Just use their knowledge and then send them to Valhalla quickly. But now that Mildew's gone--"

"You never told Mildew that you murdered me, did you?" she asked bluntly. "And what are you doing?"

"Confining you to this room." Five stakes in all, all carved with her name. "Then I'm trapping you in an iron wood flask, so you can watch what I do to your sons. You're too dangerous to be left alone." He pressed his ugly lips, as if not wanting to say that.

"Boss," Boris ventured, "she never left the room. I was watching her the whole time!"

"It didn't seem important to tell Mildew that the one person who cared about him on Berk tried to kill me in a fit of madness," Alvin went on. "And would have succeeded if not for a certain condition."

"I wasn't in control of myself." She kept her useless sword at the ready. "But if you hurt my sons again--"

"What are you going to do? Throw dandelions at me?" He tried to

laugh, but it came out as a cough. That made him angrier. He then took out one of the bottles and backed away. "I wonder what secrets he learned from the Norns. Could be useful for the oncoming destruction."

She ran to the edge of the circle, attempted to cut him down. His laughter became more genuine as he sat down and opened the bottle, drinking it. His lips glowed, and the laughter magnified, filling the room. She swore she could hear her younger son gasping in pain, fighting against the dirty fingers picking at his mind, trying to make him cede things. Alvin's expression grew tighter, harsher. He muttered with more anger.

Buzzing. Oh gods. She looked behind her, at the sheets she had abandoned. The rainbow phone was hidden, but it refused to be quiet.

"What's that?" Alvin demanded, annoyed to be interrupted. Or perhaps Mud had been able to resist.

He waved his hand. The rainbow phone slid from the sheets, out of Eos's reach. Not that she could have grabbed for it with her current state, but with the reinforced stakes not even her plants could pick up the scenes.

"Press the button on the purple stripe, Boss," Boris said. "That's what SHE did."

"Oh gods," Eos muttered, fear taking over.

Alvin didn't notice. He found the button and pressed it twice.

"Hello? Will you knock it off with the soul stealing? It's a real pain."

Eos groaned. Alvin shot a glance at her. He spoke into the device.

"Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am, stupid?" The sarcastic teenage voice, colored by angsty slang. "I'm Heluth, the goddess of death and queen-princess-Goth regent-whatever of the Underworld. Will you please stop messing with souls?"

"What?" Alvin and Boris couldn't help but look incredulous. Eos looked away, trying to hide her expression.

"You have a soul on your stupid island that belongs to me, to the Underworld, and you're trying to steal another from a living body. Give it back or I will unleash my brothers on you. And Fenris hasn't been fed for a few days."

Alvin looked at Eos. Then he looked at the phone. A cunning look came over his face.

"Can you prove that you are Heluth? I only hear a voice."

"Of course I can't prove it over the phone." Her voice was

exasperated. "But I know that you're trying to pick through a boy's mind, and that can disintegrate his soul which makes him less than high quality when he dies and comes to me. I also found a good desk job for your pal Mildew, since he is SO smart and organized."

Alvin understood about half of this. He understood the first half.

"If you want this soul so badly, why don't you come and fetch it yourself?" he asked. "Ragnorak is upon us, so you are free to leave the Underworld."

"Gods, you really are an idiot; I just got the Underworld organized with the river of decaying souls and eternal fields for children. If I leave now, everything will be chaos the way it was when I was a baby prisoner. And no, I don't have a system set so that I can take a vacation to Midgard, much as I'd love to date one of your Uglithugs, because I'm half-dead and if I leave at all then I'll be all-dead."

Alvin glanced at Eos. She shrugged her shoulders but still held the sword. The spores didn't affect her, what with her being dead and all, so she didn't say what was on her mind.

"But Ragnorak is a good time for you to leave, Heluth. That's what the stories say."

Heluth uttered a bad word about what to do with the stories. "So what will it be? Are you wolf food, or do I get my soul back?"

"We seem to be at an en passant," Alvin spoke casually. "You see, I could easily let this soul sink into the earth." He made a fist, and Eos staggered as her feet got stuck. "But I'd rather if we were on the same side."

"Are you suggesting we compromise?"

"For Thor's sake!" Eos said. "You can't trust him! He's called Treacherous for a reason-"

"Mo- Soul, stay out of this." Heluth stumbled. "So if I were to send one of my brothers to Midgard, since it is Ragnorak and they have a feeding frenzy before fighting the gods, would you accept one of them in exchange for the soul and a promise that you won't mess with any more of them? That way if you go back on your word, they'll devour you but if you keep it, then you have an ally for the oncoming destruction?"

"Heluth!" Eos started. "You can't be serious! I'm not worth-"

Alvin made another fist. Eos clutched at her throat. She still tried to protest.

"I'll keep the soul intact until I see either the World Serpent or the Great Wolf," he said. "When is the soonest that they can arrive?"

"Given that the Bifrost is kinda loopy, and it's a long journey from death to life?" Heluth pondered. "Probably three or four days. If it's Fenris, he'll appear directly on your island, and Jormagund will

swim there. Think you can control yourself for that long?"

Alvin grinned. "You have a deal, death goddess."

"Please, call me Lu. Everyone does. But you need to swear on the Loki tree that you will not mess around with that boy's soul or brain, or handle any other resurrection. I don't care about the bad-tempered dragon."

"Fine." Alvin opened his hands. "I swear on every Loki tree on Outcast Island that I will not mess around with souls."

The wind rustled, and Alvin shuddered. He coughed up more of those infernal spores.

"Good. Let me know if you want to meet up for lunch sometime after this is over. I know a good nightclub. Bye."

The rainbow phone went dead.

Alvin opened his fist. Eos spluttered and regained her voice.

"Of course, I only said I wouldn't mess with his mind." Alvin uttered a quick spell. "Doesn't mean I won't keep track of him. When the next opportunity comes--"

"I will kill you," Eos said bluntly. "If you lay a hand on him, I will kill you slowly and painfully."

"Then I won't lay a hand on him," Alvin said cheerfully. "Since I can't destroy you for a few days. Magni probably will, though."

He strode out before she could respond, still holding the rainbow phone. Another trinket to add to his belt. Gods knew what would happen if he found the number for Mud's block.

Vikings don't cry. Goddesses don't cry. Instead, Eos stood stiffly and took deep breaths, swinging the sword at imaginary foes. She thought of her sons, prayed that they would come together, and prayed that Heluth wasn't being foolish.

16. Chapter Fifteen

When Hiccup heard the swords and shouting, he urged Toothless to put on speed. The steel and conversation sounded dangerous.

"HELLO, MY NAME IS INIGO MONTOYA! YOU KILLED MY FATHER, PREPARE TO DIE!"

More steel clanging, of swords piercing flesh.

"STOP SAYING THAT!"

"HELLO, MY NAME IS INIGO MONTOYA! YOU KILLED MY FATHER, PREPARE TO DIE!"

The cliffs came into view. Toothless landed, and Hiccup popped off to run. Then he paused and gained a funny expression. There were the babies, watching intently as figures smaller than them fenced on the

cliff, one with curly black hair persisting forward. Mud was cross-legged, hands over the figures. Each wrist had a thick black bracelet, inscribed with bark patterns but gleaming with heat.

Despite there being no ropes, Mud moved his hands over the figures as if they were marionettes, and they jerked in turn. His expression was pure, exhausted concentration. Sweat matted his hair and ran down his bare torso. A fur vest lay beside him, one of Hiccup's vests. Hiccup would have felt annoyed, but he saw how it was laid on a cleaner part of the cliff and away from the excited dragons.

GET HIM, INIGO! Einar whispered. He and Helgi writhed forward, watching with trepidation. Gunhild had wrapped herself around the babies' basket with the rainbow phone and tiny sapling. Ardis yawned and stretched in the sun, but she watched the figures as well.

Hiccup glanced at Astrid, who got off Stormfly. Then he looked at Toothless for guidance. Toothless, careful to make as little sound as possible, walked around Mud and the figures, lying down behind the babies. Since he was bigger than them, he still got a good view of the show.

Hiccup understood. He lifted his feet carefully and walked around the figures, though he couldn't take his eyes off them. Astrid stopped to take off her boots.

It occurred to him that Mud looked like he hadn't slept or eaten the night before, but it also occurred to Hiccup not to interrupt the story. He remembered how Toothless had not wanted him to step on his drawing during that unforgettable day in the cove. Perhaps this was a similar event.

Astrid scooted next to him and leaned her head against his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her, noted how her big toes were slender and how the sunlight bounced off her large nails. Then he turned his attention to Mud, trying to hide his impatience and questions.

They had come towards the tail-end of the story; Hiccup and Astrid knew that because there was a big kiss before the figures faded into black mist. All good stories ended with a kiss. Then Mud gave a huge sigh and lay down on the rock. His eyes were closed, and he massaged his head.

"Mud, are you all right?" Hiccup asked quietly.

"I'm fine," Mud replied in a high-pitched squeak. "Absolutely fine." He used both hands to massage his face, taking care that the bracelets didn't touch his forehead. "Just trying to think of all the stories I could tell now, to fill my head with fictional blather."

This wasn't the complete truth; Hiccup could sense Mud holding back. Pain was prominent on the other boy's face, and he was writhing.

HOW ABOUT THE WIZARD OF OZ? Gunhild ventured.

"That's an American yarn from the 19th century!" Mud yelled, a spasm passing across his forehead. "Not . . . comprehensible!"

THEN LET **ME** TELL IT, Gunhild said, walking towards him. She placed a cool wing on his forehead. YOU JUST PROVIDE THE VISUALS.

Mud kept his eyes shut and nodded. Still prone, he raised his hands. New figures appeared on the cliff, each barely knee-height.

"Gunhild, what's going on?" Hiccup asked.

JUST LISTEN TO THE STORY. THEN WE'LL ANSWER. Gunhild fixed an expression on him. TRUST US.

Hiccup trusted. So did Astrid. They kept quiet and kept together. When Gunhild and Ardis started singing for Dorothy Gale, a dispirited shield-maiden with Toto the black Terrible Terror, Fishlegs appeared with the twins.

"The chief gave us these if we could find you!" Tuffnut announced loudly, holding a satchel. Hiccup caught a glimpse of wood carvings.

He gestured at them to be quiet; Astrid brandished her axe. The twins obeyed and landed. Mud started the illusion of a swirling cyclone, complete with falling barns and swirling houses. That got the twins' attention. Ruffnut liked how Dorothy's thick brown braids resembled hers. Fishlegs snuggled with Meatlug to listen.

All the while Hiccup watched Mud's pained face. He had a feeling something terrible was going on inside the boy's head, resented that he couldn't interrupt to address it.

Dorothy Gale swung her hatchet more violently than Astrid did on a regular basis. She also loved her aunt and uncle too much to stay in a glamorous world brimming with flying creatures and nut-filled trees. When Dorothy and her friends- a fat scarecrow, a moving statue and a Cowardly Boar- finally reached the Emerald City after blowing up a field of poppies, Mud relaxed. The figures became less jerky, more excited and lackadaisical. Gunhild let her guard down.

LET'S TAKE A BREAK, she said. Mud groaned, and Dorothy and her friends disappeared. So did the miniature version of the Emerald City and scorched fields of deadly red flowers.

"Come on!" Tuffnut exclaimed. "It was just getting good after the poppies all burst into flames!"

"I want to hear how the Wizard sets people on fire!" Ruffnut added.

"Mud," Hiccup crawled over to him, "are you all right?"

"He's gone." The boy was shuddering with relief. "I don't know why, but he's gone."

Hiccup glanced behind him at Astrid. Gunhild gained a serious expression. He placed his hands over the boy's forehead, was surprised to feel feverish sweat.

"We need to get you out of the sun," he said. "You're not feeling well."

Mud gave a squeak of laughter. "I'd suppose you'd feel unwell if a megalomaniac were picking through your brains trying to find knowledge of warfare?"

Astrid also came over, eyes concerned. Something was definitely wrong. Mud had never spoken to Hiccup before, never even acknowledged that he wanted the older kid's help, and here he was, rambling against him. The only thing burning hotter than Mud's forehead were the boy's bracelets, scorching in the sun.

ALVIN, THE MAN WHO DRAINED HIM, HAS A GOOD PORTION OF MUD'S ESSENCE, Gunhild said. IT SEEMS HE WAS TRYING TO EXTRACT INFORMATION FROM MUD'S MIND. MUD WAS FIGHTING HIM BY TELLING US STORIES, FILLING HIS HEAD WITH NONSENSE. ALVIN MUST HAVE GIVEN UP.

That didn't sound like Alvin. Hiccup's hairs stood on edge.

"Does this have to do with him being Vanir, of learning from the Norns?" Fishlegs asked. "Of being Mo-"

DON'T SAY IT! All the babies screeched with Mud. He reeled, burning forehead against Hiccup's chest, against the buzzing rune stone.

"Don't," he moaned. "That's not who I am."

Fishlegs hid behind Meatlug, peering over the listen.

THE VANIR HAVE LITTLE POWER IN THE ARCHIPELAGO, Gunhild explained. IF YOU SAY THEIR REAL NAME HERE, THEIR ESSENCE AND MAGIC DRAIN INTO THE BARREN EARTH. UNLESS A VANIR FINDS A LOOPHOLE, LIKE MAGNI DOES, THEY ARE THEN MADE HELPLESS.

"Barren?" Hiccup wrapped his arms around the smaller boy. Mud pulsed with heat.

BARREN OF MAGIC. THE GREEN DEATH, OUR GRANDFATHER, DRAINED ALL THE MAGIC FROM THE ARCHIPELAGO AFTER DRAINING ODIN. Gunhild nodded at Hiccup's open-mouthed expression. COME NOW, HOW DID YOU THINK THE GREEN DEATH GOT SO POWERFUL? NOT BY EATING OTHER DRAGONS, I CAN TELL YOU.

"Tell me later." It said something that Hiccup, considered a weakling by Viking standards, was able to get Mud on his feet though he couldn't carry him. "We need to get him back to the village. Maybe Gothi can help him."

"I thought gods were supposed to be all-powerful and tough," Tuffnut said. "Vikings don't get sick."

Mud started to moan, and Hiccup saw the signs of a severe migraine. Astrid turned to punch him, but Ardis was the one who spat fire at Tuffnut. He jumped back with a wild grin.

"Thanks! Shoot me another one."

EVEN ODIN FELL INTO DEEP SLEEP WHEN DRAINED, she said sternly. GODS

AREN'T INFALLIBLE.

IF THEY WERE, WE WOULDN'T HAVE A CHANCE AGAINST MAGNI, Gunhild added. FISHLEGS, WILL YOU PLEASE GRAB THE BASKET? WE FLEDGLINGS STILL NEED A RIDE.

He did so. Gunhild climbed behind him on Meatlug; Hiccup led Mud to Toothless, sitting him in front. Ardis went with them, and the boy dragons joined Astrid on Stormfly.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Mud murmured; his head still leaned against Hiccup's. "Don't you know what I've done?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," he answered firmly, keeping one arm around him. "Let us help you. Ardis, what are those bracelets on him?"

IRONWOOD, she answered simply. IRON CUFFS INSCRIBED WITH THE PATTERNS OF LEAVES AND BARK. THE ONLY THING THAT CAN RESTRAIN A GOD'S MAGIC AND THE ONLY THING THAT KEEPS ALVIN FROM SUMMONING MUD USING HIS ESSENCE. MAKE SURE THEY DON'T COME OFF.

Toothless took off quickly; Ardis shrieked with joy. Hiccup couldn't enjoy the ride, however; he hoped that they left one thing on the cliffs behind them: fear. Fear that he wouldn't be able to help the boy who could turn into a dragon.

* * *

><p>Mud had never thought a day would come when the aftermath of a battle hurt worse than the battle itself. Of course, he hadn't thought that when Alvin couldn't summon him- thank the gods his mother had made him pack the ironwood cuffs to take to Rainbow Isle- that Alvin would attempt to extract information from his head. It was a dirty sensation, as if his head were a jar of dirt and diamonds and Alvin's fingers were sifting through without care.<p>

Focusing on The Princess Bride, a humorous tale about true love, had made the other man angry, and if Mud had only memorized the book, a fake satire, then perhaps he would have caved in. But the Norns had introduced Mud to film, and even the Vanir would find television addicting. The images of future actors fencing on fake terrains an appropriate background music stay rooted for longer than history tomes on wars and bloodshed, and Mud had told the tale so many times to the babies that he just went through the motions of telling it. He could sense Alvin's anger with every funny piece of dialogue- with every fake-out of nightmares and giant rodents and duels to the death- but he didn't stop telling the story.

Hiccup had done the strangest thing. He had stopped to listen as Mud narrated with the glammers, and resisted the invisible fingers. He had prevented the blarney-brained adrenaline junkies from interrupting.

A part of Mud had wanted to stop and say, "Can we call it quits? You saved me, I saved you. End of story." He couldn't have, however, not while protecting his brain.

He hadn't expecting Alvin's meddling to leave him with a migraine that felt like an earthquake. Nor had he expected that his body would

let Hiccup take him, Hiccup the all-too-trusting skinny rider, back to the village, into the eyes of all those people. He groaned at the thought of seeing their pleading faces, of them wanting blessings and good crops. Of course, he also groaned at the veins throbbing through his forehead.

They didn't set him on a table this time; it was a bed, with a worn mattress, and cool hands massaging his forehead. The babies got shoed out, but they each managed to sneak in a lick. One pair was Hiccup's, hesitant but persistent; the others were even smaller, belonging to a woman with wrinkled fingers. Eventually the second pair left, and he heard scratching in the dirt. If only he could open his eyes and see, to thank them or to ask why they were so kind.

Ringin'. Phone. Customized ringtone, of perky Moonlight Sonata. Eyes closed, he mumbled and the rainbow phone flew into his hands. He pressed the button and spoke despite the murmuring and the babies' concern.

"Lu, what's up?"

"Modi? Mo? Are you okay?" Heluth, sounding concerned.

"Fine, considering my brain nearly got picked apart," he said sarcastically and groaned. Hiccup's fingers disappeared; he could hear the older boy backing away. "Could do with some painkiller and maybe a shot of ale mixed with honey."

Hiccup gave a suppressed gasp. Whether it was at the sarcasm or choice of drink, Mud couldn't tell.

"I bought you time." She was serious. "That guy who was trying to hurt you almost broke through, but I bargained with him. He's not going to mess with your mind for three days."

"Good; that means I'll have something to look forward to."

"Mud, this isn't a joke. You've got to stop this guy because he started Ragnorak."

"What?" He opened his eyes and regretted it. Searing swirls of pain blurred his vision of the hut, of the granite rock where the Night Fury lay. Groaning, he sank back down onto the pillow.

"He blew Heimdall's horn, thus alerting everyone in Asgard. Fortunately Jojo and Fenris are with me, but--"

"But I stopped him," Mud whispered into the phone. "The Norns told me how to stop him. How did he get Heimdall's horn-?"

She told him. He sat up in bed, eyes shut against what he was hearing.

"No! Not Heimdall; tell me it isn't true!"

"He's with me in the Underworld."

"No!" Mud shouted. "I did what the Norns told me to; I repaid my debt--"

"It doesn't matter what the Norns said." She was blunt, wanting to get her message across. "Here's what you have to do. There isn't a reset button, of course, because the gods think reset buttons are lame, but you can at least stop the entire world and Asgard from ending. You need to find where the Green Death stored all its magic."

"You're not making sense," he said, still shocked and disbelieving. "How can Heimdall be dead-?"

"MO. Listen to me. Take a deep breath."

He did so, trying not to snuffle. Hiccup was standing a distance away; Mud could hear his heavy breathing.

"This is happening because the Green Death took magic that rightfully belonged to the Archipelago and Odin. If the wrong man like Alvin gets his hands on it, then the world will end once and for all, but if the right person deeds the magic to the Archipelago, then everything that Alvin took will be restored to its rightful place. Ivor's soul, your essence, Mom-"

"Mum? What do you mean?" He sat up, still with his eyes shut. "Mum's still in the Underworld, isn't she?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you." She sounded guilty. "I'm sorry, Mo; I didn't know what was going on, and I sent my dad to help her-"

"Help her? Lu, what's going on?" he said urgently. She told him, and he shoved a fist into his mouth to stop from sobbing.

"The worst part is she's getting tethered to Midgard. In time she won't be able to leave because she'll either be a ghost or sucked into the Earth."

He started rocking back and forth, biting hard on his knuckles. Embarrassing tears fell.

"I'm sorry, Momo." She meant it. "He can't hurt her; nothing can hurt a soul. That's why you can't let him get his hands on you. That would tear her apart. "

Mud dropped the phone; it disappeared into the sheets. He buried his face into his hands.

"Mud, what's wrong?" Hiccup coming over.

"Alvin has my mum," he managed. Not able to hide it, unable to hide the tears. Lu's voice came muffled from the sheets.

"Find the Green Death's magic, Mo. I'm going to send help. Alvin's going to regret messing with you, and with Mom. "

He couldn't answer. His body racked with feverish sobs. Eventually he heard Hiccup grab the phone, speak into it. Soft words, then saying goodbye.

"She said she loves you. Who was that?"

Mud didn't respond. He had never felt so powerless, in so much pain, except when Alvin had drained him. Except this time more than his cousins' lives were at stake. Much more.

"My cousin," he whispered. "What am I going to do?"

Hiccup reached over him, pressed something soft into Mud's hands. It felt like a toy, with a pointed snout and button eyes. He ran his fingers over it.

"You are going to get a good night's sleep," he said firmly. "Then we make a plan."

"We?"

"You can't do this alone. Ragnorak affects everyone." It was surprising how authoritative Hiccup's voice was. "Besides, Alvin killed my mother as well. What you're holding, it's the only thing I have left of hers."

Guilt filled Mud's shaking palms. He loosened his grip on the soft toy. "This is your bed, isn't it?"

"I _chose_ to bring you here. Get some sleep, Mud."

Mud tried to lie back down; he felt Hiccup covering him with the sheets. Despite the promise to not owe the skinny one any more debts, sleep came, to ward off the throbbing pain in Mud's head.

* * *

><p>Hiccup didn't think Stoick would take the news well, but he didn't expect that ferocious, protective expression to come when he mentioned that Alvin had captured the goddess of fertility. They were at the table, all drinking ale. At least, Stoick and Gobber were; Hiccup had plain water. The babies huddled near Toothless, intimidated by the larger figures. Helgi and Einar even started to sleep; Ardis and Gunhild had to fight to stay awake.<p>

"We have to mount a rescue!" Stoick made a visible effort to not bang his fist on the table. "Who knows what Alvin will do with her--"

"Lu- Heluth, whoever was on the phone, said that Alvin couldn't hurt Mud's mother, Eos," Hiccup interjected. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but Mud had been speaking loudly.

"There's more than one way to hurt a parent," Stoick answered, and his hands shook.

"This is a pretty pickle." Gobber scratched his mustache with the hook hand. "So we've the end of the world on our hand, an incapacitated Vanir boy, and Alvin with divine essence, and one goddess imprisoned. And Gothi said she couldn't help Mud--"

"Not directly," Hiccup answered. "But Heluth said to find the Green Death's magic, whatever that is, to stop Ragnorak. That can only be on Dragon Island, since . . ." He glanced at Toothless, who glanced at his leg. The prosthetic leg, of course.

"That does seem to be an odd thing," Gobber said. "You'd think the

goddess of the underworld would WANT the end of all living things to come and the chance to escape."

LU ISN'T THAT BAD, Gunhild interjected. SHE HELPED RAISE MUD IN THE UNDERWORLD. THEY'RE VERY CLOSE.

Hiccup shrugged. "Maybe the stories are wrong. After all, none say that Magni would become a murderer and traitor to Asgard." He turned to his father. "There's one thing I want to know, though, before we make any plans."

"What's that, Hiccup?"

He took a deep breath. "Do you think Mud is my half-brother?"

Gobber spat out his ale. He also spat out one of his stone teeth. Ardis leaped up and snagged it, started to fly around the room. Gobber got up from the table and chased her, albeit with a smile.

Stoick kept his drink down and eye contact with Hiccup.

"It's just . . ." Hiccup chose his words carefully. "First, I'm not jealous. I don't think you've preferred Mud to me over the past few days; he needs the attention with a brother like Magni, it seems. But you treat him the way you treated me after I nearly died. Twice, after the collapsing rocks during the treasure quest and with the lightning."

"Three times," Gobber corrected, cornering Ardis. She spat out the tooth and giggled. "You can't forget the battle with the Green Death."

Stoick glared at Gobber. The blond-haired Viking hammered his tooth in with the tankard.

"I wasn't sure until I spoke to his mother on that rainbow block," he said softly. "YOUR mother."

"What?" Hiccup had swallowed his water, or he would have spat it out as well. He could've sworn that the air gasped with him.

"This isn't easy to say." Stoick looked at his tankard. "I didn't want to open an old wound. But when your mother died, she was pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Hiccup echoed.

PREGNANT? Gunhild made a leap for the table.

Toothless also sat up and came closer.

"Aye." Gobber nodded. "Five months. That's why Alvin was able to kill Valhallarama during their fight. That and the volcanic fumes she had inhaled on Lava Lout Island."

Another glare from Stoick. Hiccup couldn't believe this.

"My mother was the goddess of fertility?!" he exclaimed loudly. "But how-"

AUNT OYSTER SPENT A SHORT TIME ON MIDGARD AS A MORTAL, Gunhild interrupted. SHE NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT BECAUSE SHE WAS A DRAGON-SLAYER IN THAT LIFE.

Stoick took another sip. "It was hard enough burying your mother; I didn't want to think about burying a son. But somehow your mother was Eos, in mortal form, my Val. She told me who Mud was on that rainbow block; when you brought it to me two nights go."

THAT MAKES SENSE, ACTUALLY, Ardis said. IT EXPLAINS WHY MUD DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THOR, OR MAGNI, OR WHY HE WAS BORN DEAD IN ASGARD.

THOR RESTARTING MUD'S HEART WOULD HAVE MADE HIM MUD'S FATHER IN NAME ONLY, Gunhild agreed. JUST ENOUGH TO FULFILL DESTINY.

"So you see, Mud isn't your half-brother," Gobber added. "He's-"

A crash from upstairs. They turned to look. The window was open, and they heard the sound of bare feet landing on the ground.

"Mud!" Hiccup raced upstairs, already knowing he would find an empty bed and rumpled sheets. At least, he found an empty bed; Mud had folded the sheets before leaving, left the dragon doll on top of the pillows.

He ran to glance out the window. Although he couldn't see the boy- and Astrid had told him about the light-bending invisibility- he could hear him running, staggering. Sobbing.

Of course Mud wouldn't have slept. He would have heard the conversation. Heard he wasn't Thor's son. Hiccup should've known how Mud would react. It's what he would have done in the same situation.

Hiccup didn't think. He hauled himself onto Toothless and they shot off towards the disappearing sobs, calling the younger boy's name.

17. Chapter Sixteen

_The Norns had lied to him. __**Everyone**__ had lied to him._

These were the thoughts pounding against Mud's streaming eyes as he sprinted, staggered and sobbed out of the village. Away from the curious people and their dragons, into the safety of the woods. His body ached from crashing against the cliff only the previous night. Even with restored essence and a Night Fury durability- for Mud had changed into a dragon to catch the babies and take the impact of the cliffs, if you recall- the bruises still stuck to him. He couldn't even open his eyes because of that bloody migraine, hitting him across the forehead like a blow from Magni.

Gods, _Magni_. The only Vanir who had told the bloody truth. Who had told Mud they weren't brothers, that Mud was a _changeling_. Who had proven it by encasing Mud in that pit all those years ago.

Magni was _right_. He had been bloody right all along.

"Mud! Come back!"

Hiccup was behind him, riding Fury. If Mud had been able to see, or even able to concentrate, he could change into a dragon and sprint off. He could feel the other boy getting closer and increased his pace. If only the sobs would stop escaping his throat.

"Mud, I know this is difficult for you!" Hiccup called. "I'm not exactly older brother material but you have to give us a chance!"

He couldn't run anymore. He fell to his knees. The night chill pooled around him, made the headache more intense.

"It's not that!" He called back, still invisible, still crying. "It's not you, Hiccup! Go home!"

Four reptilian feet landing on the ground. Gunhild and Ardis bounding off, sniffing for him.

MUD, HE'S NOT LIKE MAGNI. HE'S NOT GOING TO HURT YOU, Gunhild said.

HE ONLY WANTS TO HELP, Ardis added. LET HIM.

Thank the gods for his cousins. He stopped bending the moonlight around him so they could see. A yellow and blue face, each tackling him.

"Then what is it?" Hiccup asked quietly, coming towards him with caution. Toothless looked concerned, also coming closer.

Mud opened his mouth to tell him to bugger off, but more crying came out instead. His throat was raw and his head spun.

Hiccup knelt beside him. He opened his arms, not to indicate a hug, but to show he was harmless. Mud still tackled him, wrapping his arms around the larger boy, grateful that he wasn't speaking. He buried his face in the fur vest.

Hiccup waited. He said nothing, didn't acknowledge the tears soaking into his clothes. He just knelt on the grass, waiting.

"I thought he was going to kill me," Mud sobbed. "I thought he was. And no one stopped him."

"Who? Magni?"

Gasping. Mud kept crying.

Stoick and Gobber approached, riding Thornado. Hiccup gestured at them to be quiet as the smaller boy clung to him.

MUD, YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL HIM. JUST SHOW HIM, Gunhild said. LIKE YOU SHOW US THE STORIES.

He broke away from Hiccup, who tried to wipe down his damp shirt and vest. Two pale fingers lifting, eyes still shut against pain.

"It was Magni's birthday," he managed. "There was a party. I was visiting at the time so I wanted to go."

Four boys, each barely an inch tall, glowing against the damp grass. They were golden this time, not black. One half their size lagged, struggled to catch up. The leader gave a visible sigh and stopped.

"Mo, you've got to something about those legs." The leader, a blonde-haired beauty of a boy, tapped the smallest one's thighs.

"What do I need to do, Maggie?" the smaller figure asked, even squeakier than Mud's.

"You need to grow." Magni grimaced as the other boys laughed. "And it's Mag-NI."

They set off again, the little version of Mud asking questions about how to grow. The real Mud, eyes fluttering, named the boys.

"Vali and Vidar, half-brothers, and Baldr, the beautiful one. All the boys destined to survive Ragnorak."

Hiccup didn't interrupt. Mud pretended not to notice the twins landing on their dragon, their loud questions of if this was more Dorothy Gale, or Snotlout arriving on his dragon.

Mud had to admit this: he had been an annoying brat of a toddler. Unable to keep up, following Magni everywhere like a puppy, always asking questions. Too smart for his own good, too loyal. Too trusting.

The glowing boys stopped in front of a pit, which had appeared in the ground. They waited for the little Mud to show up.

"If you want to grow, Mo, you have to get in there." Golden Magni pointed at the pit. "Then I'll stretch you with dirt so your bones get longer."

"That's dangerous!" The smaller Mud squeaked.

"Not for a Vanir." Magni gave a dangerous smile that everyone saw, despite this Magni being only an inch tall. Silence, even from Snotlout and the twins. "If you were a real Vanir, you'd jump in without a hesitation."

"I am Vanir!" He tried to puff up his scrawny chest. "I'm your brother!"

"No real brother of mine would be so weak." A low chuckle. "Mom and Dad didn't tell you, but some fairies switched you with my real brother as a joke. You're just a changeling!"

"I'm not!" The smaller Mud leaped into the pit and stood there. "Do it! Make me bigger!"

Hiccup's hand flew to his mouth. It was to stop a gasp, to not interrupt. The twins and Snotlout leaned forward.

Mud continued with the glamour built from his memory. Magni started to pile on the dirt around his younger brother. First soft clods of

brown, then hard rocks. The little Mud tried to stand and bear it, but he started to choke as he got buried to his chest.

"Mags, that's enough for now." Baldr was the other blonde of the group and the smallest, pushing a hand forward. "He won't be able to breathe."

Magni shook him off, increased the pressure. In the pit, the smaller Mud's arms got pinned to his side, and the rock solidified around his chest. He stopped looking tough, started to choke.

"Magni, careful! It hurts!"

Magni gained an indifferent expression. In time the rock climbed over the little Mud's shoulders, encasing him up to his head. His brother started to scream for him to stop, that Magni was right, Mud was just a changeling, just let him out. The dirt then buried him entirely, and his screams became muffled.

"Magni, bring him back!" Baldr trying to wrestle Magni, to bring his large fists down. Magni knocked the other boy to the ground easily. "You're burying him alive!"

The screams stopped. Magni let up, and the indifference faded. He looked worried.

"I didn't actually kill the changeling, did I?"

In response, the ground exploded. All the boys thrown back. Fancy building crumbling, lava spurting from the earth. Magni falling in the crater that emerged, slipping and sliding, calling for his mother. Jarnsaxa appearing, reaching for Magni. Wiping away his tears, rocking him. Searching with snake eyes for the midget saboteur, who was covered in scratches and grime, gasping for air.

Mud made the glamour disappear. It was strange, having the memory out there in the open.

Hiccup was now the one with arms wrapped tightly around him. Ardis and Gunhild snuggled next to him. The twins clapped, their dragon letting off a celebratory fireball. Snotlout looked worried, watching where the figures had been; Hookfang blew fire at him in question.

"Oh gods," Stoick whispered as Snotlout ran for the nearest water source. He came forward with Gobber. "How old were you, Mud?"

"Three. Magni was fourteen." His voice was emotionless. "As punishment for blowing up a third of Asgard, I was confined to the Underworld with my mum and Lu. I was only let out to learn from the Norns and help Gris with her babies."

"You blew up a third of Asgard? Cool!" Tuffnut said.

"_Not_ cool," Mud answered wearily. "Not cool for Jarnsaxa or Odin at least. I lost control."

"YOU got punished for defending yourself?" Hiccup was outraged. "What

about Magni?"

Mud shrugged. "His mother, Jarnsaxa, she said he didn't mean to take the joke that far, that it was harmless fun and I was a daft beast for believing him. The other boys didn't say anything about what happened, except Baldr. He sided with Jarnsaxa because the explosion broke his arm. And my fa- Thor, he took Jarnsaxa's word over mine."

"No one defended you." Hiccup couldn't believe it. "You were three years old and no one defended you."

"Mum did." There was an edge to Mud's voice. "But even she said I was a daft bairn, and the dead have enough trouble speaking for themselves."

"Daft bairn?"

"Stupid baby."

The harshness of Mud's words filled the air. Hiccup looked to his dad for support before returning his attention to the boy in his arms.

"Is that why . . ."

"I don't trust mortals or other gods?" He looked up. "Aye. I never wanted to be a daft bairn again."

There was silence. Even the twins seemed to realize this was not the time to applaud.

"You weren't stupid," Hiccup said. "You were a boy looking up to a monster."

"I've met monsters nicer than Magni," Mud said darkly. "He's Jotun scum."

He stood. Hiccup stood with him. The babies curled around their toes. Stoick came even closer, wrapped both the boys into a huge hug. They gasped, but Mud didn't complain.

WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US, MUD? Gunhild asked. WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ANYONE?

"I told Nephil," Mud gasped. "And I didn't want to complain. The Underworld wasn't so bad, and I learned from the dead. I had Mum, and Lu, Jo, Fen Uncle Loki, Gris and then you five. I was never alone."

Hiccup raised his eyebrow at the "Uncle Loki" part.

Stoick seemed to realize they couldn't breathe and set them down. Hiccup took deep breaths.

"After all this is over . . ." he seemed to be hesitating. "After we stop Ragnorak, can the babies and I stay with you? For a while?"

"Of course!" Stoick said; he seemed to want to leap for joy and throw a hammer in rage. "Why do you think we came after you, son?"

Son. Something Thor never called him. It was a rare word that hit Mud's ears. Stoick seemed to realize what he had said as well and shuffled awkwardly.

He hugged the larger man back; Hiccup also joined in. He couldn't squeeze the air out of the chief, of course, his dad. The migraine had finally started to ebb.

* * *

><p>Before leaving, he went to visit Eos. It wasn't be easy, but he had lived by one rule: no mothers involved. He had no grudge against Eos, even if she had reason enough to hate him.<p>

She recognized him immediately and tightened the grip on her sword. Her changed appearance surprised him, what with the sword and the breastplate. So did her angry expression, so different from her usual placidity.

"_You_ helped him," she said. "You let him hurt Mud. You let Heimdall die."

"I didn't mean for things to go this far," Magni said honestly, with regret. He was dressed in Changewing skin, red and ready to blend into the environment. The actual Changewing would go with him to Berk, for this mission.

"How far did you think things would go?" she paced the edge of the circle, obviously tempted to smash him with vines the way she had smashed Alvin's friend. "He murdered me, Magni! His name's Treacherous! What were you thinking, you daft bairn?"

He flinched. _Daft bairn. _The same insult she had flung on Modi all those years ago.

"I didn't come to be insulted," he said softly. "I came to apologize for your being here. Mothers are supposed to be off-limits."

"I suppose Jarnsaxa would be so proud of you," she sneered. "Proud of starting Ragnorak and selling out Asgard!"

A flush came over his cheeks. He hid it by pulling the scaly hood over his face. Now only his eyes appeared, like black dots against red.

"And you honestly think you can apologize?" Her tone softened although the words didn't. "Are you really that foolish? When you were three, you once saved Thor from a rock-slide that had imprisoned him for five years. "

"I'm not doing this for Mother. I'm doing this for Father."

"If you have any shred of decency left, Magni, you'll leave your brother out of this." She stood proud, but her words betrayed a plea. "It's enough that you got him punished in Asgard. Must be he be a madman's plaything on Midgard as well?"

"He's not my brother," Magni answered. "But I'll make sure he doesn't suffer too much."

He activated the suit, made himself disappear. Eos flung insults at his receding footsteps. If only he could make his guilt disappear as well.

It would be over soon. That was what he told himself. Soon it wouldn't matter what his mother thought. And he had dug himself too far into this scheme to turn back. Alvin had assured that by snapping an ironwood bracelet around his ankle. One carved with the reversed rune for Fehu: bondage.

* * *

><p>Stoick couldn't sleep that night. They had walked back to the village, Hiccup and Gobber shielding Mud from the curious villagers. Thornado and Toothless had cleared the people, while Stoick told them to go back to bed.<p>

The whole group had been subdued. Even Snotlout kept his mouth shut, and gods knew what he was thinking. It worried Stoick if he saw Snotlout thinking.

Mud had tried to refuse sleeping in Hiccup's bed, but he hadn't had a choice. Both father and son had sided against him, and Toothless blocked the doorway. Mud hadn't had time to protest either; exhausted from the day, and from what he had learned, he had collapsed into immediate sleep. The sheets seemed to swallow up his tiny, beaten frame.

Thornado slept with him, and Hiccup rested on the floor with Toothless. Einar and Helgi slept with him, while the girls went upstairs to sleep with Mud. They heard Mud talking in his sleep at times, just mumbling. That's not what kept them up, however. More troubling things did.

Sacrilegious thoughts ran through the chief's head. Stroking Thornado did not silence them, and he half-expected a lightning bolt to strike the hut and burn the walls to a crisp. All his life he had been told to respect Thor, to respect the gods, but the god of thunder had hurt his younger boy, hadn't protected him in Asgard! Thor was supposed to protect the weak, to uphold right values.

Then again, Stoick all his life had been told to kill dragons, and here he was. Maybe Hiccup had a point in saying the stories were wrong. But still, seeing the way Magni had buried Mud alive . . .

It made him too angry. He clung to the sheets to stop from crying out.

Dawn came. Thornado, who always slept like a blue log, roared in lieu of an alarm clock. Stoick rubbed his darkened face. He needed his strength for the daily chief duties, and he'd have to rely on a hot breakfast for that. And maybe some whittling.

Hiccup was already awake, stirring fish and oatmeal together. There were dark circles under his eyes as well.

"Morning, Dad."

"Morning, son." Stoick sat at the table as Hiccup brought the

steaming pot with a clang. "Couldn't sleep either?"

"Eh, tried, but I'm beginning to see why most Vikings don't think." Hiccup tried to smile. He couldn't hide his yawn, however.

Stoick rubbed his forehead. "Hiccup," he started, and then he stopped. This was going to be a hard question.

"Dad?"

"Have I . . ." he hesitated. "Have I ever been a bad father?"

"Dad; what a question!" Hiccup frowned, actually thinking about the question. "No, you haven't been, apart from taking Toothless to Dragon Island, and that was ages ago. There are times you don't listen or when you want to attack a problem with your fists instead of your head-

Stoick frowned this time as he poured yak milk on his oatmeal.

"-but you always protected me when you thought I was in danger. From dragons before I learned how to train them, and from Alvin. And you've protected Toothless countless times before."

He didn't say the obvious: you're nothing like Thor.

"Gods." Stoick attempted to smile and eat. "What would your mother say?"

"That's actually what kept me up," Hiccup admitted. "I'm not jealous of Mud, but he's had Mom for all his life. He knows more about her than I do. And he's had her for a longer time than I have. It's selfish, but I wish-

"I wish she could be here too." Stoick reached and tousled his hair. "We'll at least get her away from Alvin and take it from there, one step at a time."

A clamor started from outside. Gobber banged in.

"Morning, Stoick!" He reached the table, grabbed a fish and swallowed it. "You may want to come out and see this!"

Stoick groaned and started to gulp down his breakfast. "Did someone tip over the yaks again, en masse?"

"No, it's much more serious." Gobber clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hiccup, stay with Mud and take him with you to the Dragon Academy," Stoick ordered. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll be back as soon as I resolve this."

The weather was clear, and he could smell the briny nets loaded with enough cod and haddock to last through the winter. Stoick still had to wade through crowds of excited villagers, including the couple with their ugly baby Magnus, Odin rest their souls. They were staring in wonder, in complete shock.

Thornado yapped, and Stoick remembered. He climbed onto his dragon

and took off. They sailed over the awed crowd.

His mouth gaped in awe and anxiety. Not now. He did not need this after an hour's sleep.

The cliffs that overlooked the village. There were the rainbow crystals from the day before, arranged into a three-dimensional twist and glowing. A bearded man was standing there, along with three boys. At least, one boy about Mud's age, albeit bigger and with golden hair. The other two were teenagers, each carrying an axe. The bearded man held a glowing hammer, one that spun with sparks of lightning.

Stoick despite his sacrilegious thoughts, wanted to fall to his knees. He also wanted to swing a fist at that bearded face, at the man who had taken Mud from him. He did neither. Thornado landed softly and Stoick got off, approached the figure. He pressed his hand together in form of prayer. Politics and religion first, personal feelings later.

"Thor Odinson, welcome to our humble village."

18. Chapter Seventeen

While he slept, they summoned him. After all that drama on mortal Midgard, they summoned him to their abode in the World Tree. _Gods.

—

Back in the ironwood circle, trembling, finding his knees knocking into his sides. Holding the anger in his cheeks like a hairless chipmunk. He didn't dare bow, for fear of making himself fall over.

"Mud, you are looking older," Verdandi greeted him. She was stroking a large pink worm with one hand and weaving with the other. The worm rolled over on its back and gasped in pure pleasure. Nidhogg, who was rumored one day to nibble through the World Tree's roots. Right now Nidhogg didn't even seem in the mood for nibbling at the dirt floor. He simply lay like a pink, fat sausage with legs. His girth curved around the iron wood circle.

"And wiser," Skold added. She used both of her hands to hold the cloth of faith and time together.

He wet his transparent lips. Time had taught him to temper his words in front of those with power.

"Sweet child." Urdu giggled. "So calm, and yet something has changed. Something wonderful."

He did not rise to the bait, but his fists clenched and teeth locked together.

"Mud, you have our permission to be disrespectful." Verdandi stopped petting Nidhogg. "Let out your anger on us. We will not smite you."

"You lied to me," he said, hearing his voice break. "You said Thor was my father. Why?"

"Thor IS your father," Urd answered. "He chose to restart your heart in Asgard and give you a second chance at life. He brought you into this world healthy and intact."

"Then why did he never treat me like a son?"

They didn't answer. Skold was having trouble with the loom; she had to draw attention to it. He raised his voice.

"I'm not a god, my ladies! I'm not Vanir! I'm a changeling, like Magni said, a mortal given Vanir essence." He tried not to sob. "Magni was right, he was always right. I shouldn't be alive!"

"Magni was wrong," Urd said calmly. "You ARE a god, and you live up to your name, son of Thor, child of Fire and Thunder. As for the mortal part, you're only one-third mortal. The rest is dragon and Vanir, from your mother's side. If you weren't part-mortal, you would not have survived Alvin the Treacherous draining you. You would have ceased to exist, like Heimdall's left arm."

Gods, they had to bring up Heimdall, did they? His anger and grief intensified.

"Fate is unraveling," Skold said. She examined the fraying threads and tsked "Dear, dear. It seems Ragnorak is happening. You know what happens after the end, Mud, if the end comes."

"I'm not the one you want rebuilding the world!" he shouted. "Every time I try to do something right, it blows up in my face. I did what you told me to do. I repaid my debt, but Heimdall died and Ragnorak still started!"

"That wasn't a failure on your part," Skold chided him. "Ragnorak would have happened regardless, because you couldn't have repaid that debt."

"I saved Hiccup. He saved me."

"With family, a good family, you can never pay back the love and comfort they give you."

He stood with his mouth open, breathing hard.

"Heimdall chose to pass from one world to the next. He made his decision to die first instead of last. But if you had not stopped the invasion, Hiccup would have been captured, and you would have no allies for the upcoming battle."

"Allies? What battle?"

"Why, the battle to keep the world from ending. The battle to stop Alvin from finding the Green Death's magic." She smiled at his horrified expression. "Fate is unraveling itself, Mud and the only way to keep it together is if you fulfill your destiny. Will you?"

"No," he said bluntly. "I can't. I haven't learned enough. Not about mortals, or doing the right thing."

"You have learned much from the three of us." Skold's voice was soft. "About our past, the current moment, and what's to come-"

"I haven't learned what to do with Magni!" he burst out. "I can't work with him after Ragnorak. He tried to kill me when I was a tyke, and he killed my cousin Nephil, a brave baby who tried to protect me! He's working for a man who wants to pick my brains clean until I'm a bloody vegetable! If I'm to rebuild the world with Magni, it's only because I'll be used as a pawn, a source of information! I'm not Ender Wiggin; I won't do it!"

"Muddy-"

"You said I had a CHOICE when I started learning from you. That I didn't have to help the Jotun half-ling. That's the only reason I came here." Along with finding a reason to not drown himself in the Underworld's soul-polluted river, since Odin had made him take a vow not to commit suicide.

"We lied." Urd watched his hardening mouth. "You haven't had a choice since birth. But if we had told you, you wouldn't have tried so hard to learn. Or to please us."

Gods, this WAS a self-fulfilling prophecy. Being told you can avoid a future, only to find out you've crashed smack-dab into it.

"But you know why we told Odin to fetch Eos from Midgard, to change her into a maiden?" Urd continued, purring. "Why Thor had to lie with your mother to create you?"

"But he didn't. He sent her to Midgard instead, attempting to play the role of Odin and change her back into a dragon. You think I don't know the story?" He stamped his foot; it passed through the earth floor.

"It was a test of character, to see how far one would go to preserve fate. Thor failed, and that changed the future."

"And my mother and I paid the price." There were tears in Mud's eyes, allowing him to voice angry disrespect. "All because he couldn't get it up for one woman! All because you asked him to do something he would never do! Something he couldn't do, that selfish-"

The roots shook momentarily. Mud stopped, and he gained control of himself.

"Dragons are unpredictable creatures." Verdandi plucked her loom. "Unpredictable in the sense that mortals and gods know not what to do with them, and so they can change fate. Filled with the capacity to change, or to do great evil."

"Fate was becoming stale, Mud," Urd said. "Not as a vivid, not as spontaneous. To rebuild a new world, you need spontaneity. Dragon blood would have provided that spark for after Ragnorak."

"And your suffering has brought you to empathize with common mortals and flying reptiles." Verdandi ran bony fingers across Nidhogg's length. "You understand what it means to be small and helpless, and how power can corrupt."

"That's a relief," Mud said sarcastically, "because _I_ may understand, but Magni doesn't. Neither do those of Asgard, except for Loki's children, Mum and Heimdall. Heimdall's dead, Mum's being held hostage by the same man who wants my brains, and Lu and Jo and Fenris-"

"You give up so easily, Mud," Verdandi replied. "That is your flaw. You don't work as hard as you can to find a solution, not unless we offer one to you."

"Because I'm not spontaneous," he said flatly. "I'm sorry to disappoint you but I don't have risky ideas bursting out of me. All that got stamped out of me ages ago. I don't create. I remember. I remember_ everything_."

She got up; the sisters looked in alarm. Verdandi wore a flowing white shift that glowed in the darkness. Mud stood his ground as she approached the circle, stepped over the pink worm, and pressed a hand against his cheek. He couldn't feel it, not really being there, but it was eerie how close her skin was, how sincere her gray eyes looked when meeting his.

"You're stronger and smarter than you think you are," she said softly. "If you want Ragnorak to not happen yet, then you won't let it happen. Today you learned to trust those who truly care for you. And you care about those in turn. Do you remember our present to you, Mud, for doing so well?"

He remembered: the sapling that lingered in Gunhild's basket, a fragment of the World Tree that he had tended on Rainbow Isle. Planted in soil that held powdered dragon eggshell, watered with pure rain. He hadn't known what to do with it, of course, but there had been thoughts spinning in his head.

"Remember it well if you want to save your mother," she said. "Destiny must run on a straight line, but what matters is how you reach the end of that line, the journey and accomplishments. Besides, about Magni . . ."

She pressed her lips close to his ear and whispered. His eyes widened.

"No!" A new voice shouted. The ladies looked up. Mud flailed back.

"You'd best get going." Verdandi, despite him being a transparent, see-through thing, managed to grab him and plant a kiss on his cheek. "You're not alone, Mud. You never will be."

As Mud faded into wakefulness, a familiar figure thundered in, shouting denial.

Thor had found the three sisters. He must have been standing in the shadows of the World, hiding and eavesdropping. He had heard _everything_.

* * *

><p>For a world that was supposed to be ending, the weather remained warm. The invisible figures soaring across the water toward Berk had

to marvel at the calm. Magni couldn't help but feel as if he was flying towards his doom, but he couldn't stop. The ankle bracelet wouldn't let him.<p>

Alvin had sent the Scauldron with Magni and the Changewing, both as back-up and to make sure that the god did not forget his mission. In case they were found and pursued, having a venomous ally hidden underwater would allow them to escape. Nothing was more intimidating on Midgard than a long-necked dragon who spat boiling water. Yet something larger than the Scauldron followed underwater, with large yellow eyes like twin suns and teeth as long as curved swords. It dislocated its jaws with hungry fury.

The Scauldron did not have time to look back, to feel the massive jaws swallowing it. It vanished down a long, pink throat with gallons of seawater and choked on poisonous fumes. Any cry it made was smothered when the larger creature swallowed.

Magni and the Changewing did not notice the darker shadow in the ocean. They kept flying. The sun and white clouds took no notice of them.

* * *

><p>As Hiccup set a smaller bowl of oatmeal and fish on the table, Helgi and Einar woke up from where they had snoozed in the corner by the babies' basket. Toothless licked them awake, and they licked him back. Mud staggered down, looking awful. Gunhild came and wrapped around his legs.<p>

GOOD MORNING, Ardis said. DID YOU SLEEP WELL?

Mud rubbed his eyes. He picked up Gunhild and stroked her.

"Not very," he confessed. "The Norns wanted to talk to me."

Hiccup looked up, concerned. "You were in bed the whole time."

"Didn't stop them from bringing my soul to the World Tree for a short spell. Hiccup, let me help you with those dishes." Mud flicked his fingers, and the sticky pot of oatmeal flew to a large scrubbing tub. Suds started to run over the pot, as did a large brush.

MORE ESSENCE! Einar squeaked with joy. YOU'RE GETTING STRONGER!

Mud gave a small smile. It was amazing how that gesture changed his face, added a healthy tinge of pink that wasn't there.

"Want breakfast?" Hiccup gestured at the table. "We got Berk's gummiest porridge with your choice of fish and . . . fish."

"Thank you. I'm not that hungry, but thank you," Mud said. His eyes darted around the room, noted the clutter. "Those carvings are wonderful. Did you make them?"

"No, Dad did." Hiccup picked one up and brought it to the table. "He didn't have time this morning, but Dad whittles for stress relief. I guess he was thinking of Mom."

He stopped talking. Mud studied the sculpture with interest.

"Mum never talked about her Midgard life," she said. "I don't blame her, being a dragon and then forced to become a dragon-slayer, but still. In the Underworld, she has a skinnier face, and shorter hair; I'm not sure if I can explain it."

"Can you show me?" Hiccup suggested, then immediately wanted to bite back the question.

Mud smiled and waved his hands. Between them, a short woman in a white shift, flowers swirling around her bare feet. Long fingers for caressing, a healthy tinge to her cheeks. A strong scent of spring and flowers. Toothless closed his eyes to inhale the pleasant aroma.

"Wow," Hiccup said, bending to take a closer look. He could see what Mud meant; between the carving and the illusion, there was a distinct difference. Only the tender eyes were similar.

The dragons climbed onto the table. Toothless barked at them, but they didn't listen. Mud pushed the platter of fish towards them. Helgi and Einar each gulped several; Ardis grabbed a large cod and leaped to the nearest corner to nibble. Gunhild took an experimental bite of a haddock.

"So your dad is a carver," Mud said thoughtfully. He blew on a wooden spoon filled with oatmeal and chewed on it, glancing at the corner with the basket.

"Our dad," Hiccup corrected him. He sat down as well. Mud's smile faded.

"Right. It's going to take time to adjust. I'm just thinking about what the Norns told me . . ." he looked down.

"Mud?"

"That sapling growing in the basket, I think it's meant for your- I mean, Dad. If he's a whittler . . ."

He voiced his thoughts. Hiccup stared at him.

"You think it's possible?"

"Odin makes things possible. The Norns said the sapling was a gift, and that it could be used to free Mum," Mud said with a shrug. He took a few more bites of oatmeal before putting the spoon down.

"What was it like, growing up with her?"

"With her and Lu? It was like growing up with a talking rainforest. She made the Underworld a nicer place, Mum did, because she made flowers and grass sprout there. We have beautiful chambers there with canopy beds and glowing sheets- glowing because the Underworld is so dark. We have to make our own light."

Hiccup couldn't picture that. "The mom I knew was a shield-maiden. She was affectionate, as you can tell with the dragon-doll, but she

was also a woman who knew how to swing an axe. And she didn't grow flowers."

Mud tried to smile again, but it grew strained. "Maybe we know two different women then."

There was nothing to say after that. They cleaned up; apparently Mom had made everyone in the Underworld, gods or not, do chores. Mud proved adept with washing dishes, and the babies helped by carrying things. Ardis practiced her flying by leaping from table to chair with a cleaning cloth. Gunhild studied the wood carvings and Helgi and Einar peeked outside.

"Gun, let's leave the basket here," Mud called. "The World Tree fragment is for Chief Stoick- Dad."

Gunhild eyed the stretching branches, the slender leaves.

UH MUD, Einar said. YOU MAY NOT WANT TO GO OUTSIDE.

YOU REALLY, REALLY DON'T, Helgi insisted.

That meant he had to take a look. Hiccup set a scrubbing brush aside as Mud looked through the open door. His mouth dropped open in horror.

"Gods, no."

Alarmed, Hiccup shoved past him. Toothless did the same. He also saw the four figures ion the distance and gasped.

"Thor Almighty . . ." he breathed.

INDEED. Gunhild gave a dragon-like frown. ALONG WITH ODIN'S OTHER SONS: VALI, VIDAR AND BALDR. TALKING TO YOUR FATHER.

Toothless took the most sensible action; he swept the babies inside and used his tail to shut the door. Hiccup staggered back against the table, awed.

"I can't face him," Mud moaned, withdrawing into the house. "I can't face any of them. I disrespected him in front of the Norns last night. I disrespected my father!"

"He's not your father," Hiccup said sharply. "Besides, our _real_ dad gave me orders to take you to the Dragon Academy for flying lessons. We'll stay out of Thor's way until Dad sees what he wants. Here, let's go out the back door."

Mud gave him a look that equated utmost gratitude. Gunhild imitated Toothless's smile and grinned at Hiccup. The other babies thumped their tails in appreciation.

They sneaked out with the babies, and Mud changed into a Night Fury once Hiccup had locked the back door. The transition made Hiccup's eyebrows rise, but he understood. Einar and Helgi climbed onto Mud's back, and Ardis and Gunhild went with Hiccup.

"I don't know if you can fly, but Toothless and I will show you the way."

Mud nodded. He shook out his intact tail-fin. Hiccup nudged the stirrup, and he and Toothless took off. The smaller brown Night Fury followed, testing the different ways his tail-fin could spur flight. He kept up fairly well, staying in the air for short spurts. Helgi and Einar enjoyed every rise and all, shouting suggestions for how he could improve.

Hiccup had to admit this was cool, having a younger brother who could change into a Night Fury. He offered his own tips for how Mud should adjust the tail-fin, and what curves to watch out for. They didn't dare fly over the treetops and attract attention, so they had to find the forest path and stick to it.

"About time you showed!" Snotlout appeared on Hookfang, starting Mud into a crash. "With all those gods here, it feels like an Asgard party!"

Mud shook himself; Helgi and Einar didn't mind the fall. They got off and waited for him to attain a new form. He made space for Snotlout and Hookfang so that three dragons soared.

"What are you doing here, Snotlout?" Hiccup asked with mild exasperation.

"Making sure you have an escort." Snotlout leaned back. "You always need someone to watch your back on a covert mission."

"It's not a covert mission; we're just headed to the Academy."

"Hey, I may be a thug, but I'm not that stupid," Snotlout said. Hookfang snorted. "YOU want to keep out of Thor's way, and I'm going to make sure none of those kids come near Mud. I'm the bigger half of the team, so I protect you."

Mud shot him a green-eyed look of surprise. So did Toothless, Hiccup and the babies.

"Gee, I didn't know you cared." Hiccup spurred Toothless forward into the Academy center.

MUD SAYS THANK YOU, Einar called helpfully.

Wild giggles from the twins. Astrid and Fishlegs were on the Academy sidelines with their dragons. Astrid was talking to Stormfly in low, soothing tones. For good reason, Hiccup soon found out.

The twins had positioned their wood carvings around the dirt floor and shot at them from random angles. Fishlegs, cowering with the book of dragons, watched as Mud strode in with hesitation.

"Hiccup, you so need to draw him," he said. "Have you ever seen a Night Fury with a more perfect posture."

Toothless playfully batted Fishlegs with his tail; the larger boy stammered in apology. The twins stopped firing.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Ruffnut strode to Mud, circling him. "Mud, fire at Tuffnut." She made a hand gesture for "fire".

Mud bowed and gave a dragon-like snort. Then he changed back, sparking many cries of astonishment.

"Nice try, but I don't train easily," he said.

"Feisty AND destructive. I like that." She leaned over him. Mud gave a scared smile and backed away.

Ardis climbed into Snotlout's arms and batted her eyelashes in appreciation. He couldn't help but stroke her, and Hookfang gave her an affectionate head bump.

"So," Hiccup raised his voice, "School is in session!"

19. Chapter Eighteen

****Entering the third act now. Normally wouldn't comment, but got a second review on the story!****

****Matt- Fenrir does appear, and he manages to play a significant part. ****

Hiccup's Dragon Academy was the most unconventional school that Mud had ever witnessed, and he has seen many alternative programs thanks to Skold's visions. For starters, there was no assigned reading, set curricula, or homework assignments. Everyone learned by doing. Fishlegs had memorized the Book of Dragons, so he needed more confidence when testing Meatlug's ability to swallow catapult rocks.

Mud, who preferred structure and a fixed curriculum, would have balked on a regular day. He did best when presented with a problem and the means why which to solve it. But something in the babies' faces and in his gut told him to not worry. Something told him that a great calamity would shatter the peaceful ruckus, that Alvin would mount another attack. So he swallowed his tension and joined in.

The twins wanted to keep tossing the chief's discarded carvings into the air as target practice. Everyone was surprised when Hiccup gave up on discussing strategies and Mud volunteered.

"Fire is one of my elements," he said, and demonstrated with blazing hands. He made a gesture and the flames disappeared. "They can't hurt me." _ Not like Alvin can._

"How come Hiccup can't do that, if you two had the same mom AND dad?" Ruffnut asked. "Why can't he make things explode?"

Mud took a moment to answer. "Because Hiccup was not born in Asgard, where Vanir essence seeps into your body on a regular basis. Even a few minutes' exposure to Asgard changes you. Also, Mum was a mortal when she had him. When she had me, she was a dead Vanir. Different women, same soul."

The twins didn't understand, though Hiccup did. Hiccup hid his expression when Mud looked at him.

For a few minutes Mud proved that he was adept at tossing carved ducks and boars in every which direction, leaping from corner to

corner at a rapid rate. He became a blur of beige and black, and Hiccup could barely follow him. He didn't use the rainbows to teleport, which made the feat more exciting.

Belch and Barf nearly went crazy trying to get each one; the Academy became filled with stray smoke and gas. Fishlegs, who had been exposed to Zippleback gas, quickly used the book to cover his face. Snotlout laughed and inhaled a lungful; he had to retch in a bucket. Mud kept running and tossing, even when the two-headed dragon took to the air. The babies kept a score.

After fifteen minutes of firing, the Zippleback collapsed, and the twins did as well. Mud twirled the last three carvings between his fingers, grinning. The ironwood cuffs on his wrists gleamed like bracelets dipped in silver.

"I'm tired, give us some Wizard of Oz," Ruffnut said, a sweaty arm across her face.

"AFTER we give some flying lessons," Hiccup said. He gave a nod of thanks to Mud before asking the babies to come to the scorched center. Mud, who was covered in soot and burnt wood, placed the carvings in a corner before changing and joining his cousins. He wiped his face and looked several years younger.

Toothless was happy to demonstrate how to flap to gain momentum. The babies managed to attain short flight, short because their wings lacked the durability to manage long jolts. Still, everyone cheered, even the lethargic twins when little Gunhild managed to stay in the air for two minutes. Mud himself managed the longest after changing into a dragon, but even he needed practice. His flight was filled with hesitation, and worry, and he crashed several times.

"Don't worry," Hiccup said as Mud shook the sweat off his brown scales. "At least you didn't crash into a cliff. Toothless and I did that once."

Toothless nudged Hiccup with affection and slapped him with his ear.

When the sun climbed to its sticky sky pedestal, Hiccup called for break. The heat made everyone pant, and they had done more exercise than usual that morning. The babies lay in the Academy's shady corners. Everyone passed water flasks around; Mud gulped half his down. Snotlout and Hiccup went out to grab some fish for their dragons, and Gunhild sat with Fishlegs to pore over the Book of Dragons. The twins didn't move; neither did their dragon.

Astrid stood by Stormfly, scratching her cheek. Mud approached her, hesitant and still panting.

"There's something I wanted to tell you," he said. "I noticed that Stormfly and you . . ."

"What?" Astrid asked.

"I don't think it's something you want to hear, but I feel that I need to tell you."

"Tell me, Mud," she said with exasperation.

"She's not very loyal to you. When we were stopping the invasion, I sensed there was a gamey obstacle, some negative event that she associates you with."

"What event?"

"I don't know." He walked to Stormfly's side before placing a hand on her jaw. "But I think I can find out. Can you trust me?" He held out his free hand to her.

He had such a sincere, innocent expression, the same sincerity after he had let her walk with him on Rainbow Isle. That's why she took his right hand and nodded. Mud closed his eyes.

_Swirling, soaring. Hopping over mazes. Collapse. A hammer and shield crashing into pointed face. Pain, blood rushing to the head. Retreat, retreat! A blond girl holding the hammer and shield. _

_Later, kind hands stroking her. NOT belonging to the blond charging at her with an axe. _

Astrid broke away. Her hands were shaking with anger.

"She still remembers dragon training?" she cried. "But I care for her a lot now . . . I wouldn't hurt her!"

"Stormfly doesn't WANT to think of that event," Mud explained, hand still on Stormfly, "but a fragment of that memory arises every time you two are in peril. That's why she doesn't save you, why she switches loyalty over to seductive lasses. Negative association, like with Pavlov and the wee mutts."

Astrid didn't understand the last part, of course, though she remembered Mud mentioning dogs.

"That girl, the one who fed Stormfly chicken, she was a pert lass wasn't she? Swung her hips and batted her eyelashes?" Mud did an accurate impersonation of Heather. Astrid laughed.

"Pretty much. Everyone thought I was jealous of her because Hiccup took her for rides on Toothless. Then she stole the Book of Dragons for Alvin."

"Ah. More of that trusting nature from him." He nodded at Toothless, whose ears had suddenly perked up.

"About Stormfly," she started, switching back to the issue at hand, "how do I make her forget?"

"You need to make a gesture of atonement." He waved his free hand at Toothless's tail. "Hiccup, I know how he took away Fury's means to fly, but then he returned it. With trial and error. You need to find a way to ease Stormfly's fear of flying weapons. Feeding her chicken won't do it."

"How?"

He shrugged. "If it were me, I'd go for a deep massage in aloe vera and olive oil. Dragons can't resist having their scales soothed. I

can grow aloe vera and olives for Berk."

Astrid frowned at the thought of rubbing all of Stormfly's body with herbal remedies. All those scales, not to mention her horns and spines along the back. But if it meant that her dragon would never switch loyalties-

Toothless growled, and Hiccup and Snotlout's voices carried over to them. Astrid returned to the present.

"Look, he's had a rough couple of days; just give him time to adjust."

"We want to help." A harsher, new voice, suggesting perfection and utter violence. It made Astrid's insides tingle with more than fear.

Mud withdrew into the Academy's shadows. Fear and hostility returned to his face, and his shoulders started to hunch.

"Look, we know what happened when he was a baby." Snotlout was accusatory. "You may be gods, but that doesn't give you the right to not protect a three-year old from getting buried alive."

"We were _kids_." The harsh voice sounded exasperated. "And Vidar went to get help, just didn't come back in time. He must not have remembered that. Haven't you done more of the same when you were tykes?"

A pause. Snotlout was taking time to think about if he had done any bullying to the other kids. The babies stirred, and they went to the Academy entrance. Ardis stood in the front as a guard.

"We don't follow Magni anymore," A gentler voice added; this one sounded like a waterfall crashing through clouds. "We want to tell Modi that-"

"You're not supposed to say his name," Snotlout said.

"We can say it here, on your island. Dragon's blood was spilled on the shores, dragon's blood by the gallon, so the Vanir essence won't sink into the ground. Why do you think we came?"

"Snotlout, let me handle this." Hiccup was sounding calm. "First, how did you know Mud was here? And what do you mean by 'dragon's blood spilled on these shores'? We don't kill dragons. Not anymore, at least."

"First, Vidar's a hunter," the harsh voice said. "He can track the quietest mouse."

"You were also making a lot of noise with the explosions," the gentle voice added helpfully. "We just couldn't get away till now. As for the dragon blood, Ivor the son of the Green Death died here. That allowed magic to return to Berk, and thus our ability to walk this bonny earth. We know, or we would not be walking here."

Astrid froze; it seemed that Hiccup had done the same. Mud seemed to shrink and pale even more.

"Vidar and Vali," Fishlegs whispered. "Baldr's not with them, though, it seems. I wonder why."

"Just let us talk to him," Vidar said. "Let us apologize."

"You're not passing," Snotlout said. "Academy students ONLY."

A punch rang through the air; Snotlout grunted as he crashed. Hookfang shot fire, but there was a large swatting sound. Hiccup shouted in protest. Mud recoiled.

"Vali always had a temper," he whispered.

Another punch, and Hiccup was on the ground. Toothless would have charged, but Hiccup quickly shouted he was okay. Still, the Night Fury went to help his rider. He also got smacked for his troubles.

A muscular, brunette youth charged through the Academy doorway with a hammer, with a lighter-haired giant barely holding him back. The babies scrambled before they got trampled, but they had choice words.

MANNERS! Gunhild scolded. YOU DON'T ENTER UNINVITED.

LEAVE MUD ALONE! Einar, Helgi and Ardis squawked at the same time. Their combined voices made Vali stop.

"So you are Gris's children." He surveyed them, and they noticed the immaculate beard tied into a fierce knot. "Missing someone? A certain cousin or brother?"

Ardis would have fired, but Gunhild swatted her with a yellow tail-fin. The ball scorched the ground instead.

Snotlout in the distance crawled towards Hookfang, who lay with his long tongue out and eyes glazed. Hiccup took several deep breaths, both hands on his stomach, and made to stand. Meatlug got to her feet and growled, while Stormfly charged protectively in front of Astrid. Vali watched them with amusement.

"Where is Modi?" he asked plainly.

A rush of light, of rainbows. Astrid turned, but Mud had already vanished.

"If you want to talk to me, come and find me instead of punching mortals!" he called, and they heard his footsteps vanish into the distance.

Vali growled in frustration as Vidar, with light brown hair, shook his head.

"What were you expecting, Vali? You treated his new friends like they were sentries."

Hiccup, back on his feet thanks to a dazed Toothless, gave them both a dead-eyed glare as the babies turned and sniffed the ground.

"Boys, we're his new _family_."

* * *

><p>Alvin clambered up to a remote cliff on Outcast Island. The Hysteric chief was there, using the light of the A wide grin spread across his face, and the bottles of essence gleamed.<p>

He had given the rainbow phone to Norbert the Nutjob for analysis, after he himself had fiddled with it. Norbert's eye twitch always vanished when he studied new inventions, and his anger over losing the megaphones and Hysteric armory had dissipated for the moment. Alvin still stood a cautious distance away, hand on his sword.

"These crystals hold memories," Norbert commented. "And information. Listen to this."

He pressed a button on the green rune, and Heluth's voice rang out.

"Hey Mom, it's me, but you already know that. Just wanted to let you know that we're out of eggplant, and I'm trying to stop weeds from growing in the oven. So you don't freak out. Love you."

"Mom?" Alvin repeated.

"This message has a date from last month," Norbert let this sink in. "Meaning it was some time in the past. And there are more."

"Hi Mom, expect me late because there's a leak out into the elderly desk jobs. They can't work if waterlogged. Will call when I'm done. Love you."

"Hey Mom, just wanted to know if Momo wants meat pie; Fenris found a deer bothering the dead kids."

"Hey Mom, telling you that the back door is fixed. Mo can now use it to get to the Norns instead of taking the boat."

"This last message was dated from two years ago," Norbert said. "It seems there is a way to enter the Underworld without dying."

Alvin grew thoughtful. "It also seems that Eos did more in the Underworld than linger. This makes things different."

"How so?" Norbert asked.

"It gives us more leverage, and some information." Alvin stood. "By the way, you are sure that the new weapons will work?"

"If the runt doesn't make them disappear," Norbert muttered, the eye twitch returning. He lunged for his axe and started chipping at the rock.

Alvin left him there, walked back to the chamber that held Eos. He heard her singing in an undertone and stomped in to interrupt. More armor on her, and more meat.

"You could have mentioned that Heluth calls you 'Mom'," he said, not even bothering with a greeting.

She glared.

"Quite a shame, since it's obvious; she was protecting 'Momo' when making me swear not to mess with his soul. You two have been omitting information."

An angry, grey flush darkened her white cheeks.

"You could have asked her for help earlier, escaped before I strengthened the bonds. Why didn't you?"

"Because I'm not like you," she said. "Before I remembered what you did, I wouldn't have wished Heluth's wrath on anyone. Not even you, Alvin."

"Pity," he clucked. "We're going to find that back door into the Underworld. She'll certainly pledge loyalty to protect the boy who nearly lost his mind yesterday. You should keep less information on that rainbow crystal."

This information didn't seem to upset Eos. She leaned on her sword and shook her head.

"You apparently have never dealt with a teenager."

* * *

><p>He didn't mean to run, and it wasn't to run away from them. It was to get Vali and Vidar away from the group. The way they trampled through, as if the mortals-<p>

Not the mortals. His older brother, his real brother, and his real brother's friends. Who had taken him in and admitted him to the Academy despite him being much younger, though not slower. They had made an effort to include him.

The cuffs made his wrists sweat. His footsteps were deliberately loud in the woods, and he shouted taunts for Vali and Vidar to find him. They couldn't resist the hunt. They were taking too long, though, as the babies cried out protest against the gods.

He slowed down, debated whether or not to make him more visible. Something whizzed past his cheek and landed in the grass. He jumped. Then he paused to examine it.

It was a dart. And a dart filled with some kind of liquid. He smelled dragon nip.

Another dart whizzed past him, and he jolted. No person standing, although there was rustling and a shadow. The outline of a dragon against a tree, waiting.

"Magni," he said out loud. The only person who could use the earth vibrations to track people, even if they were invisible. Though Magni was a lousy shot if he knew where Mud was and still couldn't hit him.

He shouldn't have talked. The ground sunk, and he found himself buried to his chest, arms pinned by soil and rock. He lost control

over the light-bending and became visible. Air got squeezed out of him, so he couldn't scream. He screamed anyway, frightened and panicking that he had turned three again.

"Father's here!" he managed, using his own essence to fight against the rock. "You don't want him to see you-"

An invisible hand grabbed his head, forced it back. Another dart hovering in the air, coming towards his neck. Mud struggled and screamed, but he couldn't change into a Night Fury when panic ran through his insides, and Magni was always the stronger of the two-

A shadow slid into the air and pushed. The dart fell out of invisible Magni's hands as he tumbled. Mud was able to slide the earth away, and launch himself into the air. The shadow solidified into a person, one very familiar.

"Uncle Loki!" he cried, with joy and confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your skin," Loki replied, placing protective arms around him. His fingers were dripping in black paint. "Or your mother would skin me. They were stupid enough to make the darts from MY tree's wood, so I can control them. Then I stowed in Magni's pack to keep my son safe. Then I marked Magni so he's not easily invisible."

"It's technically not wood," Mud gasped, watching as a black smiley face stood in the air and faced them and a Changewing dragon materialized. "It's moss structure so there aren't any rings-"

The Changewing spat acid; they had to dodge. Loki had a wobbly run, but he kept Mud shielded with his thin arms. Magni had recovered as well, for he started sending the vibrations out and more shifting dirt.

"Run for it!" Loki shouted, sending out vibrations of his own, vibrations that made the smiley face trip again and stumble. "Take to the skies and make sure to catch any lightning he sends! You're not the only one Magni wants!"

Mud would have done so, if not confused that his uncle, the god of mischief, was risking his life for another person. Granted, risking his life and making Magni look like a fool in the process. Uncle Loki could never resist a good joke. But still.

To make the Changewing vanish, he uttered a guttural cry that made it take to the air. The smiley face shouted in frustration for it to come back, but Mud had learned the command from Gunhild too well. It was in their blood.

He heard multiple pairs of running feet: his cousins, the Berk dragon riders, and Vali and Vidar. The babies came the fastest on foot, oddly enough, tromping like a quartet of lion cubs.

LEAVE HIM ALONE! Gunhild screeched at the smiley face. All the baby dragons reared back and fired.

"Don't!" Loki shouted, but the four fireballs collided with Magni's invisible form. There was a horrible stench of burning flesh and a scream.

NIGHT FURIES NEVER MISS, Einar said approvingly.

THAT WAS FOR NEPHIL! Ardis shouted.

AND FOR BETRAYING MUD, Helgi added.

"It was a nice gesture, cousins," Mud started, as he saw the golden form emerging from the smoke. He didn't want to tell them they had made things worse. Loki did anyway.

"He doesn't need that mortal shell anymore." He threw his hands up while standing in front of Mud. "That's why you never seek revenge in the heat of the moment. You wait for the anger to cool down."

The Berk riders pulled up to a halt, astonished at what they were seeing. A large youth of perhaps twenty floated in the air, with a clean-shaven face and golden battle armor. His boots were spiked, one with an iron wood weapon wrapped around it. Lightning and rocks danced in his hands, and murderous intent flew in his eyes.

"That's Magni's true form?" Fishlegs asked with awe.

"He's beautiful," Astrid couldn't help but say.

"Yeah." Ruffnut had a dazed gleam of admiration. "He can shoot that lightning at ME anytime."

Vali and Vidar raised their weapons as Magni summoned more lightning.

"Magni, stop this madness of hurting dragons and mortals," Vidar spoke, with that gentle waterfall voice. His honey-colored eyes held the promise of mercy. "This was not what Thor wanted. You can still talk to him, make amends."

"It's too late," Magni said bluntly. He gestured at the iron wood bracelet. Mud saw it and gasped.

"My poor brother," he whispered. Loki heard.

"Yes, poor enough to bury you alive three times in your life," he snorted. "Why not pity a carnivorous plant while it suffers indigestion?"

"Then we must fight." Vali raised his hammer. Not as glorious at Mjollnir, but just as dangerous. Vidar also raised a sword, and the dragons prepared to fire.

"I'm not here to fight." Magni raised his hands, and the skies thundered. "I'm here to fetch and carry."

Mud turned, and Loki mouthed a warning as a bolt of lightning streaked in the sky. Mud leaped out of his uncle's protective grip, leaping over the babies and startled Vanir brothers. Toothless then understood and screeched. They saw the lightning's path, and Mud tried to block it.

It was aimed for Hiccup.

20. Chapter Nineteen

****Doomsday Beam- Yes, extremely exciting, :D****

****Matt- Jo's already appeared, albeit unnamed, but he has a bigger part. You'll see.****

Hiccup had never wanted to punch someone more than he wanted to punch these young demigods, including the dark-haired idiot had punched him and frightened away Mud. He knew this was a disrespect towards Asgard and may have earned him another blow to the stomach.

So he had given them both- Vali and Vidar- a piece of his mind about storming through like they had permission to blow up the place. The twins had perked up on hearing this last bit, and even Snotlout, checking Hookfang's pulse by listening to his neck, looked surprised to see Hiccup's red face and pure frustration. Toothless agreed with every word and glared at the divine brothers.

Vidar stared at him, at him standing up and calling them "boys." So did Vali.

"You shouldn't be getting up so easily." He clenched his fist.

"Go on, hit me again," Hiccup shouted, thrusting out his scrawny chest. The rune stone jutted out. "That'll prove that you're actually sincere about your apologies."

Vidar placed a hand on his brother's fist. His eyes focused on Hiccup's chest.

"You are wearing a rune stone for protection," he said with surprise. "That's how you survived Vali's blow."

"It's stuck to me, and it's beside the point." Hiccup yanked at it to demonstrate.

"Who gave it to you?" Vidar asked.

"A brown dragon named Ivor!" He marched towards them, still swaying from side to side. "Don't change the subject! Maybe things have changed, but you don't come in and intimidate normal people to get what you want!"

Vidar took a step back, his eyes gazing downward.

"I apologize for the two of us," he said, giving Vali a significant shake. "We have not behaved with good conduct. But our intentions are pure; we wish to amend for our past behavior."

Hiccup took several angry deep breaths. "Apology accepted. Now, if we're going to find Mud, you can't chase him. We're going to approach him calmly-

That's when they heard screaming. Pure, high-pitched screaming that was growing fainter. The woods muffled the sound, but they couldn't muffle the terror and choking sounds.

Four pairs of dragon feet, pounding into the dust. He turned to see

the babies running into the woods, sprinting and taking to the air when they could. Ardis was in the lead, and Helgi made an effort to drag Gunhild.

"Wait, where are you going?" Hiccup called.

TO FIND MUD! Ardis shouted. HE'S IN TROUBLE!

MAGNI'S ON BERK! Gunhild screeched. WE CAN SMELL HIM.

MUD, HANG ON! Einar called to the vanishing trees. In time the babies vanished.

Toothless banged his head to the ground. Hiccup felt like doing the same.

"We'll get them, bud," he promised.

There was no time to waste; after checking on Hookfang, who was down for the count but not seriously injured, Hiccup mounted Toothless. Snotlout was stuck between wanting to climb on Toothless and staying with his dragon.

"I don't trust them." He jerked a finger at Vali and Vidar's silent, swiftly disappearing figures. "But Hookfang-

"Stay with him, alert my father and Gobber about what's happened. We may need backup," Hiccup said. He tapped the stone.

"But-

"You're the better half of the team," Hiccup said, trying to hide his disbelief in the words. "That means you can be the element of surprise if things go wrong and our undefeatable backup. Then you'll be the hero of the hour."

Snotlout had to grin at that.

"I like being the hero."

"Good. Take care of Hookfang, and get my father!" Hiccup kicked the stirrup and took off. Toothless pointed his nose towards the wood and the path that the babies made. Astrid, Fishlegs and the twins followed on Stormfly.

By the time they reached Mud and Magni, Mud had stopped screaming; that's because a thin man with dark hair was shielding him, telling him to run for it. The babies fired at a smiley face that screamed, only for a larger, more dangerous being to arise from it.

Hiccup hadn't been amused when he heard Astrid call Magni's real form "beautiful." Nor had he been amused when Mud had expressed pity for Magni. The kid hadn't trusted them, but he pitied the twisted Vanir who had made him scream like that? And called him "poor brother"?

The thin man said exactly what Hiccup wanted to say, albeit with much more accurate sarcasm. That he was able to do so, since Hiccup was the king of sarcasm, earned Hiccup's respect. That and he seemed to be the only handsome one of the new arrivals that seemed to actually

protect Mud.

Magni spoke about "fetching and carrying". That's when Hiccup heard the sky crackle, looked up to see the lightning bolt. He ducked and spurred Toothless to dodge. Even so, it would have run through his shoulder had not Mud leaped into the air, squished a hand against Hiccup's face, and catch the lightning with his other hand. He then slung the bolt so that it hit a distant tree and scorched its top off.

Everyone from Berk gaped, though the Vanir looked unimpressed. The impact made Hiccup lean back; his prosthetic nearly slipped out of Toothless's stirrup. Thank the gods he was strapped in, and that flying was second nature to him.

"Sorry!" Mud apologized, taking his hand off Hiccup's face and giving him personal space. Then, while clambering around Toothless, he shouted, "Are you daft, Magni? You could have killed him!"

"My intent was not to kill," Magni said coldly, more lightning dancing between his fingers. "I merely want to destroy that protective rune stone that you made for him. If it means a little more electricity than usual-"

"I didn't make it for him!" Mud roared, and he stood up behind Hiccup. His bare feet pressed into the saddle. Fury radiated from his red, dirt-stained face. "Ivor gave it to him! And even if I had made it for my real brother, you have no right to bloody attack him!"

"You had no right to give protection to the dragons!" Magni retorted, shooting more lightning. Mud caught it with both hands and cradled it. "The Green Death became powerful because he drained Odin of his magic!"

"Ivor was not like his father!" The lightning spun into an electric blur between Mud's fingers. "He was trying to protect his kin, MY kin, from being enslaved by murderous mortals!"

"What I wouldn't give for a sack of nuts right now," Tuffnut said with appreciation.

It occurred to Hiccup had he had never seen Mud look so enraged. It also occurred to him that Mud could change into a Night Fury, shoot fire and catch lightning. He leaned forward, Toothless flapping into a furious hover, so that the smaller boy had better aim. But Mud did not shoot the lightning back. He kept it spinning, the rage stirring on his face.

Vali threw his hammer at Magni. The blonde god caught it and swung it back. The blunt end caught Vali in the chest and knocked him against a tree, causing the tree to fall. He remained conscious, but the hammer pinned him to the ground.

The twins then went on the offensive, more for the joy of it than for actually defeating him. Their dragon had barely breathed gas around Magni, however, when the lightning hit them. Mud shouted, but the twins giggled as they crashed. Their dragon collapsed with identical grins of joy, and the babies barely dodged.

"Do that again!" Ruffnut called. "With more lightning!"

Magni ignored them and faced the group.

"Oh Thor," Fishlegs gasped. Astrid laid a comforting hand on him.

We can't just attack him head on, Hiccup thought. _We need to know his weaknesses._ He flew closer to Fishlegs and whispered a request.

"Um, doesn't use a weapon, is impervious to fire and lightning and can shoot them back," Fishlegs stammered. "Favors his right side. Maybe we if aimed for his eyes?"

Hiccup shook his head. "Mud, does Magni have any weaknesses?"

"Only two," Mud muttered. "And neither of them is here."

"You're so naive, and blinded by your dragon blood,_ changeling_, " Magni said. More lightning shot at the babies, who dodged between the trees. They retorted with plasma blasts that didn't even scorch his armor. He made to attack again.

"Don't touch them!" Mud shot the lightning so that it grazed Magni's face. His expression changed, although he remained in the air.

"Breaking your vow to attack ME? You choose exile and punishment then, changeling?"

Fire balled in Mud's hands, and he made to aim.

"Being confined to the Underworld was the best thing that happened to me! I saw what Asgard really was, what cruelty it favored. If I had known what kind of monster you would become, what violence you would cause, I would have killed you all those years ago!"

Astrid gasped. Vidar, who had pulled the hammer off Vali, stood up.

"You don't mean that," Vidar said.

"He does," the thin man said. "And I don't blame him. MY children treated Modi better than anyone on Asgard did, except Heimdall. And yet THEY are considered monsters."

"Everyone on Asgard admired you. _I_ admired you," Mud went on. "You had no reason to kill my uncle or cousin, or to let Alvin take my mum! "

At this last remark, Magni flinched. "Your mere existence cast a shadow over Father! He walked always with his head hung when remembering you! You really are his greatest failure, a mistake that should have never been born," Magni said. Another bolt of lightning, though he held onto an end of it with his right hand. Mud caught the bolt and tugged.

"Oh, like it's MY fault that Father didn't obey Odin's commands," Mud shot back. "Like it's my fault he sent Mum to Midgard instead of

conceiving a more Asgard-like child of Fire and Thunder. I'm not his greatest failure. I'm not even his son."

"He is right." Something shot between the lightning that Mud and Magni both tugged. It absorbed the bolt, made it vanish. Magni turned, and his mouth dropped open.

"Father!" he said, sounding dismayed. "I--"

"Oh, NOW you show up, big brother," the thin man called. "Where were you when your son tried to bury Modi alive?"

Thor ignored the man, who must have been Loki. His red cape billowed behind him, and he approached Magni.

"Magni, you need to leave Midgard," he said urgently. "Destiny has been changed, and I can't protect you if it's set in motion."

Hiccup spluttered in outrage. Mud, who had previously looked dismayed as well, gained a hard expression.

"He hasn't changed at all!" he said. "Let's go."

"Mud--"

"Let the Vanir work out their issues." Mud gestured. "I know you don't want to retreat, Hiccup, but Father-- Thor, he can deal with Magni. Magni's not getting his hands on you. This is a battle for the gods." To the babies, he uttered a low, "Desert. _Desert_. Get to the village."

WE DON'T RUN, Einar growled.

"You do when I say you have to. Nephil's been avenged. So have I. Magni's weakness is here. _Desert_."

Mud tried to keep his voice low so that no one else would hear. Magni's ears seemed to perk up anyway, even as he argued with Thor.

Hiccup wanted to protest, wanted to shout at Thor for caring about Magni. But he saw sense in Mud's words. If a rogue god wants to strike lightning at you and take you to delusional enemies, best thing to do is to back away and form a battle plan. So, as Mud bent the light around them, so that Toothless's black form vanished along with Astrid and Fishlegs on their dragon. They made to do quiet retreat, following the babies back to the village. Who knows, perhaps they would have made it. The twins stayed on the ground and watched the drama.

"This wasn't what I wanted you to do." Thor spread his hands out with regret. "Modi was not my greatest failure. My failure was changing destiny for the worse."

"So you admit it!" Magni said; his deep voice was breaking. "You wish that the changeling were never born!"

"Only because I ignored Odin's orders," Thor said, wrapping his arms around his son. "Only because I did not lie with Eos, and then I sentenced her to a life of pain on Midgard. These were my failings,

not his."

"He's kin with the dragons, Father! His grandfather drained Odin!"

"I have never borne a grudge against the dragons for what one of their kind did," Thor said. "I brought Gris's son Fury to life with Mjollnir, and Gris is now one of Asgard. She is the new Guardian of the Bifrost."

Toothless's eyes widened on hearing this. So did Magni's.

"I did this for you!" He howled, gesturing around him. "I tried to stop the dragons from gaining power again, from taking over this Archipelago. I wanted you to be happy!"

"If you want me to be happy, Magni, return to Asgard using this makeshift Bifrost." Thor pointed Mjollnir in the village's direction. "Submit to Odin's will; get this madness out of your head. Atone for your crimes. The Norns changed your fate with mine, but it can be changed back."

"What do you mean?" There was an edge to Magni's voice. Thor didn't take notice of that or of the iron wood around his son's ankle.

The lightning this time was quiet. Small, silent streams of electricity shot through the sky. Stormfly reared, and Meatlug shivered mid-air. None of the bolts struck the dragons or their riders, but they centered on Hiccup, Mud, and Toothless. Mud deflected them, but they kept coming. Kept marking their location.

Toothless's connecting rod, Hiccup realized with a jolt. Lightning's attracted to metal. Even if Magni couldn't see them, he could track them. Follow them.

"Since it's Ragnorak, all the monsters are free now," Thor said, unable to see the panicked dragons in the sky.

"Including my sons Jormagund and Fenris," Loki added from the ground; he was watching the sky with a feverish fervor. "And as you know, Jojo is supposed to kill Thor in a duel to the death, though he doesn't have an incentive at the moment."

The lightning got more intense; Mud had his hands full blocking each bolt. At this rate one would slip past his small fingers, hit the tail-fin, set it on fire, and then-

And then? Hiccup didn't want to think about it. He set Toothless to fly lower, so that any fall would be minimal. The lightning followed them.

"That doesn't involve me," Magni said, in denial of what he was hearing. Even if he wanted to stop, and he was hesitating. "My destiny is to help rebuild the world after Ragnorak."

Mud muttered a swear word. Toothless was shaking from the shock of multiple lightning bolts aimed at them. Hiccup tried to ignore the sensation that something terrible was about to happen, that the drama would build up to tragedy.

Something terrible did happen. But not in the way that anyone but Thor and Loki expected.

"Destiny changed when Heimdall died." Thor looked so solemn and sorry. "The Norns knew that Jormagund would not attack me-"

Toothless's tail-fin shook, and two bolts hit it. The dragon screeched in pain as the tail-fin caught on fire. Mud quickly dove back, gathered the flames on his fingers, but the damage was done. They started to go down. And would have crashed, had not something large, scaly and heavy appeared under them. They landed with a jolt.

"But he will attack you if you don't leave now," Loki finished.

"Jo!" Mud gasped. Toothless reared, and even Hiccup cringed. They were standing on a row of gleaming brown scales, each the size of a Berk shield.

"The World Serpent?" Hiccup exclaimed. "But why-?"

"Jo," Mud said in an urgent voice. "Thanks for saving us. But you need to get out of here."

"Listen to him, Jojo," Loki called. "I don't want you getting killed. Hide in the vast seas."

A large head reared up in front of them, ancient and reptilian. Jormagund's eyes were as large as two orange suns, and each breath sent a ripple across his shield-sized scales. His tongue could have wrapped around three yaks in their prime. Hiccup couldn't help but back away. Mud walked forward, hands out.

The orange eyes clearly said one thing: _Not leaving, kiddo._

"Jo, this is serious!" Mud exclaimed with frustration. "You can't just barge in and put yourself in calumny-" He made as if to push against the head that was as big as the Great Hall. Jormagund retreated from Modi's small hands with an apologetic, tender look.

That's when Hiccup understood. He had made a similar gesture to Toothless back in the Kill Ring, the day he had decided not to kill the Monstrous Nightmare, telling his dragon to leave.

Mud was definitely Hiccup's brother.

Astrid yelled a warning. Something shot through the air. Before Hiccup could get on Toothless, pull Mud with them, and make a mad leap through the ground, another part of Jormagund- his tail, Hiccup thought- wrapped around the trio. Not enough to suffocate them, but enough to keep them in place. Toothless roared in protest, and made to fire. From a distance, the lightning approached again.

"Jo, stop!" Mud shouted. "He's going to electrocute you. And when I'm bound like this I can't-"

The tail curled; Hiccup, Mud and Toothless curled with it. Stormfly and Fishlegs fired at the serpent's middle, but the spines and flames bounced off harmlessly. And then, like a pitcher's arm uncurls before letting loose a baseball, Jormagund's tail uncurled and shot off into the distance. The two boys and dragon, still wrapped in the snake's coils, screamed as they vanished with the tail, off beyond the Berk shores.

21. Chapter Twenty

****Matt-** It's like you're anticipating who will appear in each chapter! Uncanny and awesome. :D**

Alvin growled. He was in his main hut with Norbert and several men. He had laid out a map of the Archipelago, complete with Berk outlined in red and watched two drops of essence move across the map. Each drop held an image of what was happening in miniature; another Outcast had placed upside-down telescopes above the drops to magnify the images so that each perspective filled the air.

Norbert also watched, stroking his axe. Yet he did not display the typical Hysteric anger, only the feral bloodlust that comes from watching battle. There was curiosity mixed in with that blood lust, and wonder. Wonder at seeing divine wrath in play.

It bothered Alvin that Loki, the god of mischief, had aided Modi. They had named the trees on Outcast Island after the trickster god, and Alvin had healthy respect for those ostracized from powerful places. Loki liked to cause trouble for Thor, and what could be greater trouble than supporting Thor's runt? By logical extension, that meant causing trouble for Alvin.

Modi making the Changewing desert made Alvin clench his teeth. It had taken months to tame that dragon! But he was a patient man, and fortunately male Changewings were easy to tend on Outcast Island. The mothers were harder, but they had an army of dragons for that purpose. How fortunate that he had kept them as a backup.

Heluth had made him swear by the Loki trees not to mess with souls, but she hadn't said anything about keeping tabs on the boy. He couldn't hear the conversations, only the intense emotions swirling from each image. Rage, from Modi, born from an explosive trigger and Magni, sorrowful and determined after the pain. Two brothers, fighting to the near death. It was almost poetic. That Magni had swatted the other two gods who had appeared made this a laughable tragedy.

Other parts of the fight created true tragedy. Savage was lost; Alvin knew that after Magni's essence had swirled with pain and black smudges of death. Burnt by four baby dragon fireballs, not even given the mercy of a broken neck. Several Outcasts had removed their helmets to show respect; Woedin had bowed his head. Perhaps Heluth would show mercy and let his soul recuperate.

More likely not. But if Alvin had Modi as a bargaining chip, then things would change.

Alvin did not express sorrow, however, any more than he had expressed sorrow for Mildew or Woedin. Savage had been a loyal

second-in-command, an unwitting victim for Magni's ulterior, stupidly noble motives. Alvin had taken revenge with that iron wood bracelet, by making the god his divine servant.

Getting that bracelet on Magni had been hard enough, what with the demigod's loyalties wavering and crafting the reverse of Fehu onto metal. Alvin at times had to mutter memorized runes under his breath, cursing the loss of that valued book. Of course Magni would have packed it, perhaps to find out to break the bondage spell. But THOR ALMIGHTY appearing and reasoning with him? If not for that bracelet, then Magni could have- would have- caved in. Alvin had to keep muttering spells so that the lightning would single out Modi and Hiccup, when they had vanished with the rainbow beams. He'd have to find a more reliable way to locate the Child of Fire and Thunder.

The serpent had been the last straw. Jormagund appearing, not only saving Hiccup and Modi but also pitching them off onto the distant horizon. Its mere appearance told Alvin one thing: Heluth had lied. She had lied to Alvin about the monsters needing three or four days to travel the Bifrost.

And the affectionate gestures that Modi exchanged with the serpent? Jormagund's eyes had told Alvin that Loki's children would NEVER ally with Alvin, perish the thought. It also meant that if Fenris appeared on Outcast Island-

"We need to find them," he said. The Outcasts and Hysterics, who had watched the swirling images go past with fascination, blinked as if awakened from a dream. Alvin's men replaced their helmets on their head. Norbert stood up and nodded.

"The serpent won't last longer." He pointed to the sphere. "Magni is killing him. And Hiccup's furious dragon cannot fly."

Alvin took the iron wood flask from his belt and poured it onto Modi's droplet. The essence grew and moved to a place on the map, rapidly then it stopped. Alvin whispered a simple charm, and the water froze into a smack of ice. He gave a cruel smile. This was messing with the boy's body, not his mind.

"And now neither can go anywhere. We must prepare the ships!"

The images above Magni's essence gleamed with a screech as a large fang tore through, as long as a man's sword and dripping with green venom. The image blackened, and the droplet on the map sunk through the parchment.

* * *

><p>Mud stopped screaming when he had been able to process the electric current running below them, charring the lovely brown scales. Then he had tried to move his arm, to at least get one free and deflect the current. It wouldn't move, of course, because Jo had them wrapped too tightly. Mud's limbs went numb, as did his mind.<p>

Jo's dying. He's dying to protect us from Magni. It's because of me.

"Hiccup, help me get an arm free!" he whispered, whispering because his voice was hoarse.

"Easier said than done!" Hiccup grunted, from where his face was smashed against Toothless's wings. "I can barely move my own arms!"

Mud's hope died. A sense of helplessness took over once again. He managed to twist his frame so that he could look downward and see a black hole in the middle of the ocean. Heluth's back door. Jormagund must have used that to travel, just as he did all those months ago. It resembled an empty maelstrom.

What seemed like hours zoomed past them as snake got electrocuted below them, although it was only thirty minutes. The tail slowed down above a chunk of rocky island. By then both the boys' faces burned with wind chill, and their lips were dry. The scales had kept them warm, but Jormagund's unwrapped and deposited them onto cool soil, just as the lightning traveled through it. Toothless and Mud landed on their feet, but Hiccup collapsed against his dragon. He was taking swift breaths.

Mud staggered to the side of the rock. He raised his arms, but the electricity already taken its toll.

"No," he whispered, sending lightning into the water. There was no response. "Jo? You have to get up. I need you."

Hiccup got to his feet and walked towards the smaller boy. Mud took no notice of him. He kept sending down bolts of lightning with increased desperation,. Charred scales the size of shields floated to the surface, crashing against the cliff-side. So did dead fish, electrocuted from the lightning.

"You are not dying on me, Jormagund Lokisson! You're not allowed to!" His vest fluttered to the ground like a dead leaf, and Mud bent his knees in preparation of a dive. Then his limbs froze. "Oh gods."

"Mud, what's wrong?" Hiccup approached him, eyes on the dissipating lightning bolts.

"I can't move." He made an effort to straighten his legs and couldn't. He attempted to make a fist and punch the air, but even that was unfeasible. It was as if someone had poured transparent wax over him.

Hiccup tried to pull him away from the spot. It wasn't a matter of weakness; being thirty pounds heavier than your younger brother made a difference. But he could feel the stiffening limbs rooted to the cliff, and Mud nearly toppled onto him.

"Let's get you onto Toothless." Hiccup tried to pull him forward, and Mud cried out in pain. "What happened?"

"Alvin," Mud cried with anger. "He used my essence to paralyze me-that son of a half troll!" More sluggish attempts to express his rage.

"Is there a way to break this spell?" Hiccup asked. He looked around

him and immediately knew where they were: Dragon Island.

"Only one." Mud gritted his teeth. "Do you still have a water flask?"

Hiccup had one clipped to his waist. He took it out and opened it.

"Hold it to my finger. It's a long shot, but it's worth it."

Hiccup did as he was told. A glow flew from Mud's body to the flask; he was able to let his arms fall and gasped. Some color vanished from his face, and he gasped in pain.

"This was how Magni found me on Berk," he said, dipping his finger into the flask again. "Alvin must have kept a tracer on my essence, so he knew where I was. That means--"

"It's fine," Hiccup said. "Don't finish that thought until I can get you on Toothless. There's something I want to know, though."

"What?"

"How in Odin's name are you on good terms with the World Serpent?" Hiccup's voice rose higher. He attempted to calm it. "Jormagund is supposed to be imprisoned until Ragnorak, and he's a giant snake!"

"Was a giant snake." Mud's voice was miserable. "I let him free a couple of years back."

"But . . ." Hiccup turned to watch the floating scales. "He could have swallowed you in one gulp!"

"That was the idea."

The flask slipped out of Hiccup's hand. Glowing water spilled onto the cliff, sinking into it. Mud groaned and was able to move his legs. His cheeks were pasty white.

"I'm still tethered to the spot, but at least I'm not paralyzed. Bloody Outcast."

"Mud," Hiccup said with disbelief, "you WANTED Jormagund to kill you? WHY?"

"I wasn't of use to anyone," Mud said, looking at the scales. "Except to Heluth, and she was lonely in the Underworld. Even when my punishment was lifted, no one liked me in Asgard, except Heimdall and Uncle Loki. No one thought a runt like me was fit for a great destiny, but Odin had made me vow not to take my own life. So I thought, let the serpent kill me and reunite with his sister, give Thor a reason to hate Jormagund so that they could have their fight to the death during Ragnorak, and another Modi could be born as a proper Asgardian. I could stay in the Underworld with Mum and help run the place. Everyone would be happy."

Hiccup stared at him. Mud rubbed his arms and picked up his vest. He recalled that day, looking into those eyes for the first time without

fear, awaiting the poisonous fangs.

"Perhaps he would have swallowed me whole if I hadn't smelt like Heluth, carried the scent of death with me." His voice was quiet, still morose. "Instead, he let me take him to the Underworld and create glamour to take his place. Lu got him to swallow all the decayed souls, and that's what he does now. Did. He let me ride on his back."

Hiccup's lips opened, but no words came out. Toothless nuzzled him. They both recalled that day in the woods, when Hiccup had found the Night Fury wrapped in bolas. Yes, each had thought that the other would kill him, but to deliberately seek death? To welcome that swift descent into darkness?

"It wasn't enough. I then released Fenris from his muzzle, expecting death or permanent confinement to the Underworld. Again, he didn't kill me and I wasn't exiled. He didn't pose a threat to anyone in the Underworld, not till Ragnorak happened. That's when Odin sent me to the Norns, however, to give me a productive education. I thought it was to keep me out of trouble." Mud's voice was bitter. "Instead, it was to become what I was supposed to be, a child of destiny."

They stared at the horizon.

"They're coming. Alvin and that barmy Norbert lunatic," Mud said.

"And we're trapped here," Hiccup said with fake cheer. "Should be fun fighting two hostile tribes."

"Do you have a spare tail-fin for Fury?"

"Fury- oh Toothless. Yeah, but it's back on Berk. Besides, even if I had it, I'd need the spare connecting rod-"

A beam of rainbows shot from the sky into Mud's hands. They solidified into a green satchel and a rainbow phone. He managed a wan smile.

"Freedom of the rainbows comes in handy. You should go," he said, handing the bag to an open-mouthed Hiccup.

"What about you?" Hiccup opened the satchel and took out the yellow cloth. Toothless inspected it.

"I may be stuck, but I'm not helpless." Mud indicated with a tiny zap of lightning. "Besides, Alvin needed both Magni and me to control the world after Ragnorak. Now that Magni's dead, he's lost one of his pawns."

Hiccup set his teeth as he replaced the tail-fin. "We're not leaving you."

"And I'm not letting you get bloody captured!" Mud snapped. "I don't know how far I can walk from this spot, and it's two armies combined as one. Even with their armory reduced-"

"We're not leaving you. We'll make a plan once we know how far we can go." Hiccup grabbed his small wrist. The iron cuffs were damp with

chill. Being thirty pounds heavier did make a difference, and he was able to drag Mud towards the Night Fury.

"Why can't you think of yourself for once?" Mud brought back his free wrist, about to summon lightning. "Why do you have to be so noble and self-sacrificing instead of thinking? At least one of us can make it back intact!"

"Mud," Hiccup said in what he hoped was a reasonable tone. "You can zap me all you like, but this rune stone is going to protect me, so nothing can stop me from dragging you onto Toothless. Besides, Heluth told you to find the Green Death's magic, whatever it is?"

Mud, fist still drawn back, nodded.

"We're on Dragon Island, where Toothless and I fought the Green Death. Jormagund must have left us here for a reason." Hiccup nodded at the distant mountain. "Maybe it's in there, where he lingered before Dad attacked. If Alvin's coming, there's a good chance he will find it. But we're here first, and we have a head start."

Mud's fist dropped. He followed Hiccup, who still led him by the wrist, and mounted behind him. Only a backward glance at the spilled water and essence on the ground, thanking the gods that Hiccup had not asked why his lightning bolts had become smaller. Instead, Hiccup made an irrelevant, sarcastic comment.

"People used to think I was crazy for releasing Toothless," he said. "But releasing the World Serpent, thinking he was going to kill you and then befriending him? Then doing the same with Fenris? That makes what I did small in comparison. I'm starting to get jealous of you."

Mud managed another wan smile. He looked to the skies and prayed that he could still control the clouds. No one like fighting with all that rain and thunder.

Prayer would have meant nothing. Mud was mortal again, having drained his entire essence to gain that limited mobility. He said nothing as they entered the powdery darkness.

* * *

><p>"That could have gone better." Loki threw up his hands to cover his quivering eyes. "Children. Whatever can you do with them?"<p>

Stoick, who had just arrived to see the giant serpent sink his fangs into Magni's shoulder, glanced sharply at the sorrowful trickster god. Same glowing perfection as Thor, but with a dark undercurrent. The god had Hiccup's sarcasm, albeit with more polish.

Hiccup . . . Stoick shook his head against what Astrid and the twins told him, that Jormagund had pitched them away. He had told them to follow the tail, but Loki had put a stop to that. Thor was pulling Magni away from the serpent's dying head, laying him in a quiet corner under a large tree.

"Great idea, chief, but you have a personal Bifrost at your beck and call." He nodded at Astrid, Fishlegs, and the twins. "They'll need

you, of course, and we will join when we can. Find Modi's sword and take it with you; it will come in handy."

They obeyed, trudging off. Stoick moved to follow, but Loki stopped him by gripping his arm. He held the chief in place, and Thornado growled with suspicion.

"And why should they trust you, trickster?" Vali said. He had recovered but still staggered.

"Maybe it's because Modi freed two of my children from a lifetime of imprisonment and reunited them with my third," Loki said calmly. "Maybe it's because his mother did me a great favor that I can only repay in this fashion. Or maybe it's because I'm fond of the boy. But if you want to risk your necks to save them, you don't need my permission." He waved them away. "Be warned that you will probably fade into nothing if you get caught."

With suspicion, Vidar and Vali followed the dragon riders. They leaped to the trees and followed, swinging like hairless gorillas. Vidar, not burdened with an axe, swung with more grace while Vali struggled.

Stoick watched them with numb resentment. If only Baldr hadn't caught the village's attention, with his pretty face and gentle manner. If only Thor hadn't challenged Stoick to that customary drinking contest, keeping him busy while Vidar and Vali searched for Modi. If only Snotlout had arrived sooner, with the news of Hookfang being out of action. If only, if only . . .

"We're following them later, chief," Loki said, his tone softer. "You have a more important task at hand."

There was a padding of footsteps. Those who remained in the clearing- Stoick, Gobber, Thornado, Loki, Thor and a dying Magni- backed away as a giant wolf knocked down trees with paws the size of Gronckles. He left a magnificent trail behind him.

Snotlout let out a shriek, only to blush when everyone stared at him. Thor raised his hammer.

"Hold it, big brother!" Loki waved his hand. "You've already done enough damage today, and I don't want to lose another son." His eyes hardened as he gestured at a dead Joramung. "I most certainly _do not_."

Thor backed away, went back to Magni, whose breathing had started to rattle. No one approached them.

"Fenris comes in peace. He means no harm, don't you, Fenny?" He let go of Stoick and started stroking the wolf's large paw. The wolf gave a muffled whine when he saw Jormagund. Ashes fell from his thick pelt.

"Oh, no Outcasts on the island to slaughter? They all left before you could have your fun, and invisible dragons attacked you? You poor puppy." Loki stroked him with morose affection.

Fenris bent and opened his mouth. A large chunk of rock- bitten from the center of an island that smelled of Loki tree- came out, with a

hut glued to the top of it. There was a cry of "Fenris, be careful! I'm not exactly solid!"

Stoick gaped. He recognized the voice. "Val!"

"Eos," Loki corrected him. "Though she was once your wife, Valhallarama of the White Arms. It seems Fenris found her on Outcast Island. She was in an underground part of it, it seems. Atta boy, Fenny."

"Is that you, Loki?" Her pert voice came out. "Don't worry about me; Alvin's gone after the boys."

"We know, darling," Loki replied. "But we have to save you first."

"_Loki Odinsson_-"

He ignored her. "You see, Chief Stoick, you knew her best in her mortal life, and I know her best in her Asgardian life. You may not know this as well, but Modi packed a cutting of the World Tree with him, which I believe is in the village. If we work together, your hands and my brain, we can give her a proper body. Then she can rip Alvin in two with her plants."

"What do you mean?" Stoick asked harshly. He didn't dare think, dare hope that the trickster god spoke true. "You mean, we can bring her back to life?"

Loki nodded. "If you want to call it that, yes. I prefer to call it 'divine wood carving 101.'"

The sarcasm didn't dent Stoick's confused elation. Part of him wanted to go after Hiccup and Mud, keep them safe from Alvin. Most of him wanted to stay, however, and believe. If anyone deserved to hurt Alvin, it was his Val.

So he and Thornado stayed. Gobber went with Snotlout to tend Hookfang.

22. Chapter Twenty-One

****Matt- Yeah. At least he died saving someone rather than as a mindless monster.****

Too late, too late. Such powerful words, echoing in Thor's head as he cradled his son's body, speaking softly to him.

"Magni, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to do this."

"I know," Magni slurred. He had pulled out the snake fang out of his shoulder before sinking to the soil. His last bolt of lightning had coursed through Jormagund's form, but the venom took its toll on the demigod.

My fate, Thor thought bitterly. _I was the one supposed to die this way._

Blood and foaming poison seeped against Thor's desperate fingers. He

had never wished more to be Loki, who was rumored to lock his sorrow in a glass box hidden in his cloak. He envied his younger brother, now focused on the mortals, who was still able to think.

"Father." Magni spoke the title with effort. "Take it off."

"What?"

"Take. It. Off." He indicated with shaking fingers.

Oh. That cursed bracelet. It throbbed against Magni's effort. Thor gritted his teeth, grabbed the scalding ironwood with both hands- scalding because it was meant to restrain those of Asgard- and yanked. The bracelet came off, and he flung it into the nearest corner. Crude workmanship, for the dwarves had fashioned an ironwood that only restrained the Vanir instead of hurting them. Thor tried not to soothe his burnt palms.

Magni gave a rattling sigh and lay back. The wild vicious look faded from his face, and he winced against the protruding snake fang.

"It's off, Magni. You're free." How do you apologize for setting your son on the wrong path, for not believing that he could commit murder and betrayal? How do you see him as a wrongdoer?

"Father. I'm. So. Sorry." Each word grew fainter. He clutched at Thor like a sick child.

"I am too. You got a hero's death. You'll be celebrated in Valhalla." Thor didn't know if this was the truth, but surely Asgard still considered his son a hero. There were scriptures after all, and Magni was his child, his flesh and blood! Surely that could merit forgiveness.

"It. hurts."

"I know."

"I. didn't. want. to fight. the snake. He. made. me."

Thor knew that as well. He had seen it in his son's eyes; Magni for his father's sake had tried to hold back, saw the pain that would erupt if battle happened. Whoever had fashioned that bracelet had forced him forward, attempting to apprehend those two boys, both sons of the bearded chief Thor had distracted. One of those sons had once looked up to Thor as a father.

Guilt clogged Thor's throat. He couldn't even think of Modi now, not with his son's blood staining his tunic. The boy was not his son, but it wasn't Modi's fault that events had transpired that way. Modi had put it best: if Thor had "gotten it up" for Eos all those years ago, then none of this would have happened. Magni would not have become fearful and willing to please. Heimdall would still be alive.

Fate would not be unraveling.

He couldn't bring himself to send Magni to Valhalla with Mjollnir's lightning, to ease this feverish pain coursing through him. He could

only hold him and soothe him, distract him from the swiftly working snake venom. Magni started to ramble.

Modi's real father, the bearded chief named Stoick, watched for brief, sympathetic minutes before turning to Loki and the others. Thor didn't blame him. He had sensed hostility from the mortal, mixed with fearful respect. If a stranger had taken Magni, raised him only to neglect him, then he would have charred that stranger with lightning.

The Norns' words came back to him: "Magni chose his own path, but he thought it was the one you wanted him to take," Urd had chided him with cheery malice. "He didn't realize that you would always be haunted by your failure with playing the role of Odin, and that nothing anyone could do would fix that."

Magni stopped breathing. Thor held onto the body as it lost heat. He waited for grief to leave him, so that he could act. For once he envied Modi's resilience, that ability to accept death and move on to do what he had to do. Then again, perhaps living in the Underworld had helped with that.

It wasn't fair. He had come too late. Magni hadn't even had proper last words or a painless death. "He made me." What kind of ending was that? What would Jarnsaxa think of it?

Thor sat as Loki talked with Stoick and small baby dragons appeared, one dragging a sapling. Loki spoke of Eos, praising her as a mother and a brave woman. Stoick listened and whittled a tree branch first for practice.

Loki stopped narrating to ask Baldr, who had trudged in with a sweaty face, if the young god had encountered any runs with mistletoe. Baldr, who had spent unflinching hours with that godforsaken ugly baby they called Magnus, gave a squeak and ran behind Stoick.

Thor kept sitting. He watched everything. He wasn't ready to do anything yet. Stoick worked on the sapling as one of the baby dragons, a yellow version of her mother Gris, chanted.

* * *

><p>Toothless had once taken Hiccup into the heart of this mountain, the Dragon's Nest. It had been night-time then, and Hiccup's biggest worry at the time had been, "Where is Toothless taking us? Are we going to the place that my father's been trying to find for decades?"<p>

His worry now, with Mud's sharp green eyes taking in the darkness was, "Why am I doing this? Why am I not getting us off the island before Alvin comes?"

The answers were obvious; Mud had made it clear that he was "tethered" to the island, despite what he did with the water, and Hiccup wasn't leaving him to Alvin's mercy. And perhaps they would find something on the island, if giant snakes did things for a good reason.

The only good thing about his dad invading the nest was that it had brought the Green Death out into the open air, Hiccup and Toothless's

natural element. Within the mountain's confines, not to mention the awful smell, they would have stood a lesser chance. Hiccup noted that now as Toothless hovered in the darkness and the stench of damp mold and waste came towards them. Mud placed a small hand over his mouth and nose.

"No one's been in here for a long time," he said softly. "We need to stop for a moment."

They landed on a ledge. It could have been the one that Toothless had landed on those fateful months ago, when the Night Fury had shown Hiccup and Astrid the nest. Mud, frowning, looked to the opening behind them. Sunlight burst through the hole, slicing shadows onto the rocks. He held the phone in his hands, trying something.

"Just what I thought," he said.

"What?"

"Once we go down there, I won't be able to use freedom of the rainbows." He gestured at the sky. "Not unless I have a piece of rainbow crystal with me. This could be a problem if we run into trouble down there, because we won't know what's happening outside."

Hiccup despite himself joined Mud to look at the opening. It seemed smaller and beckoning to them. "Mud, the Green Death is dead. Toothless and I killed it."

Colored light streamed from the opening. Another rainbow crystal appeared in Mud's hand. He focused, and it turned a bright brown, brown as the rocks. When he turned it at a certain angle, the light sparkled off it, but otherwise it resembled an ordinary rock.

"I was worried more about Alvin's Whispering Death," he said darkly. "It can burrow underground."

"But you killed it." Hiccup couldn't help but state the obvious. "Unless Alvin sliced up his own dragon to Snoggletog ribbons."

"It wasn't sliced up for long." Mud sighed. "Alvin must have figured out a way to resurrect it because it was up and about when Astrid helped me and the babies stop the invasion."

Hiccup couldn't fathom this, since he and Toothless had seen the beast's corpse cut up. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to figure out how to place this outside." He gestured. "We need to know what's going on outside while we're down there, in case Alvin and his army comes. Otherwise we'll be completely in the dark, if you'll pardon the expression."

"We won't be completely in the dark." Hiccup patted Toothless. The dragon wrinkled his nose at the smell. "But couldn't you just put it by the opening?"

"It'll be too prominent." Mud turned over the crystal so that it glittered. "The sun will expose it. Last time the crystals got sabotaged, so Gris and I didn't know when an invasion was happening. They have to be hidden, and there's more than one way in here."

That WAS true; Stoick had even made a human-sized opening thanks to several catapults. Hiccup scratched his chin.

"It's my fault," Mud said bitterly. "I didn't think of it till after we came in. And we can't possibly put crystals around the entire island; there isn't any time."

Before Hiccup could argue, more colored lights flared into the opening. Mud jumped back.

"That's not me doing that," he said.

"No, it's us!" A familiar voice said. Hiccup and Toothless also stepped back, with joy.

"Tuff! Ruff! Astrid, Fishlegs . . ." Hiccup's voice trailed off as he realized that he was scrambling too close to the edge, and that his friends weren't alone. Toothless scooped him up so they could hover and give the other dragons space. Mud kept to the wall, watching Vidar and Vali with undisguised frustration.

"Snotlout stayed back to take care of Hookfang. We used the Bifrost and asked it to take us to you," Astrid mounted Stormfly and flew beside Hiccup. She reached forward to punch him and give him a one-armed hug. "Are you two okay?"

"Fine, until you drop me into the bottomless chasm below us," Hiccup said, pulled to one side. She let go and punched him again.

"You think you could get tossed by a snake and leave us behind?" Tuffnut said. Ruffnut nodded.

"That was so cool. Must have done a number to your brains. Did you see stars?"

"Plenty," Mud replied without listening, eyes on the Vanir. "What are you doing here? Don't you know it's dangerous for Vanir on Midgard?"

"We don't run," Vali said; he dangled over the opening with one hand. "And Loki warned us about fading into nothing if someone calls us by our names."

"It's not just that. That man who put the ironwood on Magni and drained me, he wants to use those who survive Ragnorak as pawns. That means, you two and me." He stamped his foot. "We may as well be handing him the world's future on a platter!"

"Not all the world," Fishlegs interjected with a hysterical giggle. "Baldr isn't here."

"Baldr hasn't died yet and come back to life," Mud snapped. "Heluth hasn't fallen in love with him yet and demanded that Uncle Loki And I doubt that will be happening any time soon."

"What?" This was Hiccup.

"That's how Ragnorak is REALLY supposed to start." Mud took a deep breath. "Baldr's MY age now, so Lu isn't interested in him. He's

supposed to reach his twenties, become a handsome god, have a run-in with mistletoe thanks to Uncle Loki and the blind god Hodr, and only return from the Underworld when it's broken open.

Fishlegs nodded on every count.

"But Loki SAVED you," Hiccup said. "And 'Lu' is your cousin. She cares about you."

"I don't know if that's what will happen; that's only what's been written what will happen. I don't know what's supposed to be happening NOW, given fate is unraveling, but our destinies haven't changed. Odin's sons, you two are in the most danger by being with us."

"We know," Vali said. "But this man doesn't know we are here, and we haven't been drained of our essence." He punched the opening, making it larger. Rocks fell in a neat pile below his dangling boot.

"And I am a hunter," Vidar said. "We know how to walk stealthily."

Hiccup and Mud looked to each other, dragon rider hovering in the dark and boy on the ground. They both were thinking the same thing.

"Fine, but keep yourselves hidden." Mud walked towards Vidar and gave him the crystal. The larger demigod cast a prominent shadow over him. "Alvin has a tracer on me, so he'll know I'm in the mountain. That's why you can't be with me. Keep this on you and patrol the island with your brother, Odin's sons, and don't give your names away. If something happens, talk into the crystal and let us know when they come. We'll come out as soon as we can and if you're in trouble--"

"We don't get in trouble," Vali called; he swung from the opening and slid down the outside of the mountain. They heard his thick fingers dig into the rock.

"What are you looking for down there?" Vidar looked past the ledge into the darkness. "Something alive, or dead?"

"Magic can't be classified as either," Mud said. "The Green Death's magic, to be specific."

"Ah." Vidar scratched his chin. "I can't track magic. If only that dragon were alive."

"No, it's much better that the Green Death is not alive," Hiccup said hastily as all the dragon riders and their dragons started to protest. Belch started erupting green gas. "Otherwise we'd have all been eaten by now."

Vidar shrugged. "Do you have a way of tracking this magic? Do you know what form it will take?"

"Not precisely," Mud said. "We just know it's here."

"You have your work cut out for you."

"There must be something down there," Hiccup said. "Otherwise, why would we be on this island?"

"Duh. Because a giant snake threw you!" Tuffnut said.

"We'll find something," Mud said. "Jo doesn't do things without purpose, especially when Lu is involved."

"Just so you know," Vidar said, "magic never takes a form without reason either. A creature like the Green Death would deed it for one being in particular, before dying. Otherwise, the implosion of magic from his dead body would have driven all living beings within range to incurable insanity."

Everyone took a moment to digest this, or at least to comprehend the implications of a "deed".

"So, the Green Death could have turned Hiccup into a lunatic when he and Toothless killed it?" Ruffnut asked with dismay. "And it didn't happen? We could have had a Berserk dragon trainer!"

"People have accused me of being crazy," Hiccup remarked dryly.

Mud peered at him. "Vidar, is there something you know that we don't? Do you know what form the Green Death's magic will take?"

"No. If only." He shook his head. "Just a feeling that it will be meant for only one being, mortal, Vanir or dragon. Be careful, son of Thor."

"He's not my father," Mud called as Vidar swung over Belch and Barf to reach the opening and also slide down the mountain. He then turned and beckoned. Hiccup hovered closer to the ledge so that Mud could join him on Toothless.

"It smells like Boot Night down there," Tuffnut peered down and sniffed.

"At least it means nothing living is down there besides mold." More crystals appeared in Mud's hands; he tossed two to the twins and one to Fishlegs. "If anything happens, call on it. Gris should be able to get us out of here if we get in a kerfuffle."

The twins' crystals were identical swirls of red and blue, so they couldn't argue over which one was better. Fishlegs's crystal was pure white, reassuring. Astrid received a blue one specked with yellow, like Stormfly. When Hiccup held out his hand, he received a purple block of stone.

"Just one thing, Mud," Hiccup said as they hovered with their glowing crystals. "Promise me you won't run off."

"What?"

"Promise me you won't run off," Hiccup said, eyes leveling with him. "It's really annoying."

"I'll put you in danger," Mud whispered. "I never do the right thing correctly."

"We're Vikings. Danger's in our breakfast."

Fishlegs nodded. "Much as we'd like to avoid it."

Mud looked at the dragon riders around him, and at the stagnant abyss below. "Only if you promise me not to leap into danger without thinking. You didn't defeat the Green Death by charging at him with no plan."

That was true. Hiccup couldn't help but grin ruefully. "So it's a promise?"

"It's a promise." Mud took his right hand and gripped it with red fingers. The ironwood bracelets scraped against Hiccup's skin. "I swear by both hands to not run off, even to keep you safe."

"And I swear by my right hand to think before putting myself in danger," Hiccup recited. He returned the squeeze before letting go.

Mud raised an eyebrow. "That wasn't what I meant."

"That's what you said." Hiccup nudged Toothless into the dive. Mud had no time to respond as stale air and darkness rushed upon them. The opening in the mountain grew smaller, although the crystals grew of their own volition. The remaining dragon riders followed, Fishlegs and Tuffnut clutching their crystals for dear life. Ruffnut cheered with the thrill of cold and utter black.

23. Chapter Twenty-Two

Mud became quiet the deeper they went. For some reason the dark comforted him the way a black wool blanket comforts a sleeping baby on a rainy evening, and that comfort heightened his alertness. Something nagged him about the familiar feeling, like he had forgotten an important detail on a history test.

The dragons begged to differ; all seemed jittery with the smell of death, and of the large monster that had once hypnotized him. Toothless's eyes became black slits, perhaps remembering how the Green Death had used him as a catapult sniper. Belch emitted more gas, and it was all Fishlegs could do to urge Meatlug to not spit fire in panic. Astrid wasn't doing better with Stormfly, who swung her spine-laden tail with panic.

He whispered a request to Gris for more water, and his aunt complied. Mud's phone, which felt more cracked on the sides than he remembered, shot a beam into his hands. Hiccup turned to watch, and Toothless stumbled in mid-air. He veered and nearly crashed into Stormfly, who shot a stray spine. Toothless barely dodged the sharp projectile.

"Sorry," Mud whispered. A small flask appeared in his hands, sloshing with water. At Hiccup's questioning look he said, "Just in case."

Hiccup nodded; he bunched a question in his mouth and stroked Toothless to reassure him. The Night Fury stabilized his flight but

didn't calm his eyes. This made Mud's ears prickle even more. He didn't like the others' uneasiness and his steadying breaths.

The stench became pure, stale mold; Meatlug retched fire into a nearby corner, and there was a mild explosion. The twins and Astrid crashed onto a damp floor, and the fire had glanced off Toothless. A wing banged into a wall, but he managed to lower himself slowly.

"You okay?" Astrid asked Tuffnut.

"Not hurting enough," he grunted.

"I'm okay!" Fishlegs chirped with anxiety.

"Good." She hopped off Stormfly to charge. Fishlegs yelped as her fist banged into his shoulder. "Why can't you be take control of your dragon?"

"She doesn't like damp, moldy places!" Fishlegs yelped again, standing in front of his dragon. "It gives her bad allergies!"

"Astrid, stop!" Hiccup said with exasperation as Toothless wobbled to a landing.

Mud got off the Night Fury first. He held the flask in one hand and his phone in the other. Astrid backed away from Fishlegs, who sighed in relief.

"It smells awesome in here." Ruffnut smiled and gave a big inhale. Then she coughed and spluttered. Tuffnut whacked her.

"That would be the smell of mold growing in damp parts of the rock." Mud frowned. "There must be an underground source of water. Otherwise, Green couldn't have kept itself hydrated."

Astrid came towards him, pulling a sharp, sparkling object. "I almost forgot to give you this. Loki said you'd need it."

"Harmful!" Mud cried with joy, reaching for the blade. It glowed with a pleasant yellow. He stroked it as he would stroke a beautiful dragon. "Yes, I'm all right; sorry for leaving you behind but dragons don't like weapons- look, the chief's axe can't be that abrasive towards new weapons-it's been giving you a hard time? You poor blade."

"Toothless, can you give us light?" Hiccup asked.

"No need." Mud lifted Harmful. "Show off a bit, Harmful."

The sword complied by shooting ten white blasts to the walls. Everyone shielded their eyes as several torches lit up with individual, glowing swirls of light. Three tunnels appeared, one on the left sealed with scratched rock. The sword switched colors with glee.

"It's official," Hiccup said dryly. "I'm now jealous."

"Eh, don't be. Heimdall can forge another sword-" Mud's face fell.

"Well, not Heimdall obviously. I can ask Gris if someone in Asgard will make a blade for you from rainbow crystal. Someone must owe her a favor."

His face was turning red with doubt; the more he thought, the more he doubted. No one would owe a dragon a favor in Asgard, after what happened with Green and Odin. Gris would need several centuries to gather those kinds of favors.

Ruffnut took the attention off him by walking to a torch and putting her hand in it.

"Ruff!" Hiccup cried. Her face drooped, as did her braids.

"It's not burning," she said, pushing her hand through it. "That sucks. It's . . . just light."

"Green probably lit those spots with fire down here, so that he could see." Mud ran a finger around the torch handles from where they hung. "Someone must have cleaned them up recently; these handles have been recently carved."

"Who would come down here?" Tuffnut asked. "I mean, who could come here and clean up a dead dragon's dark, damp and soggy place?"

Mud didn't answer. Hiccup took a torch from the wall. Soot coated his fingernails.

"It seems the Green Death liked to decorate." He raised his eyes and pointed to the ceiling. Toothless's black pupils grew, and he chirped nervously.

Everyone looked to the ceiling; like Gris's cave on Rainbow Isle, images covered the rock. Unlike the clean, polished paintings that Heimdall had made, these were crude, thick scratches of dragons flying, of an old man conferring with a large dragon. The only painted figures were a yellow dragon soaring across the scratches and a maiden who wove flowers.

"Mum," Mud whispered with recognition. "She was known as flightless Eos before Odin changed her into a Vanir maiden."

"Our mother was a dragon?" Hiccup exclaimed. He seemed to be remembering something, even with the denial in his voice.

"Of course; why do you think I can change into a Night Fury?" Mud asked. "Why do you think Green went insane after losing Mum?"

"Green?" Tuffnut asked.

"The Green Death. He was once a good dragon, before he gave up Mum to Odin." Mud nodded at the yellow figures. "He must have made these images while Odin's magic slowly drove him insane, and into isolation."

"Mud, I've lost you," Hiccup said. "So the babies were telling the truth? They weren't covering up for you?"

Mud turned to see four confused faces. Right, he thought. Mortals

wouldn't know._

"I'll tell you as we walk. It's not a happy story. We need to go this way." He pointed to the tunnel in the middle.

"But the images continue into that tunnel," Fishlegs said, his voice quavering. "And they seem to be going more 'insane'."

He couldn't have been more right; the scratches were thicker and more frantic around that tunnel, as if Green had been trying to draw the images before they left his mind. The dragons were more fragmented; their flat fire flew on the walls as dead leaves, and their eyes were barely more than grids of pentagons and rose blossoms. The scratched stars were little more than floating triangles, sometimes twisting against streams of bloody clouds.

Van Gogh would have had a field day with these paintings, Mud thought. He didn't bother saying this, knowing that Vikings hadn't developed abstract art or neurological studies.

"That's why we have to go down that one," Mud said. "It's the one that's making me nervous as well."

"But the Green Death couldn't have fit into this tunnel." Hiccup demonstrated by hovering around the entrance with Toothless. "We can't fly on our dragons, even with varying wingspans."

"I don't think he went into the tunnel." Mud scowled at the sealed up tunnel on the left. Now he knew why the darkness felt familiar. "Fishlegs, is there another name for Dragon Island? Does it have any mythology associated with it?"

"The seas here do!" Fishlegs squeaked. "The stretch of foggy islands around Dragon Island was called Helheim's Gate because most of the ships that sailed to find the nest never came back--"

"Helheim's Gate. I might have known!" Mud started dialing his phone. That's when Hiccup realized too, because he recognized writing on the sealed tunnel's rocks.

"'Closed for renovation,'" he read out-loud. "These runes are more old-fashioned, and they look like the scratches on the wall, but they are runes. Someone human was down here."

"Not human," Mud muttered. "Half-Vanir, half-Jotun. And half-dead, if you want to get technical."

Hiccup turned to him with alarm. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"What is he saying, Hiccup?" Astrid asked. Mud answered the phone and started barking into it, so Hiccup had to explain. Fishlegs, who had already figured it out, clung to Meatlug. She wrapped her wings around his bulky shoulders.

"Helheim is another name for the Underworld and for Heluth, goddess of the dead. I think we're in her territory."

* * *

><p>Dragon Island needs trees, Vidar thought; he was a carpenter in Asgard when not hunting, and foliage would provide adequate cover. The most that he and Vali could do were to move boulders and sweep their footprints from the gravelly soil. Vali didn't see the point.

"They're going to know someone's on the island anyway when they trigger the snares and manholes," he pointed out, not too graciously. The crystal was strapped to his thigh and vibrated like an angry red hornet.

"Our goal is to give the sons of Thor enough time to find the Green Death's magic," Vidar replied. "And pray that when that magic is restored that we will not have to hold back when fighting."

The crystals provided more help than they had thought initially; when Vidar had openly lamented needing branches and rope for snares, Gris had sent them enough twigs to build a bonfire. A bonfire would be their last resort, but Vidar had spent a good portion of the next hour making snares and nets. He knew their quarry and size.

Vali helped with the heavy lifting, as he usually did; he liked hunting but lacked Vidar's patience for waiting in the bush. Still, he dug through rock- a difficult feat even for him- and scouted the island; they could use arrows to pick off an army one by one.

Apart from Gris, Modi had not updated them about the mountain. The silence made Vidar quaver with concern, but he said nothing. Vali would only snort and shake with anxiety. As time passed, their worry about being on dangerous Midgard grew, though they only talked about traps and lookout points.

When the brothers had dug up most of Dragon Island and set enough snares to bag a herd of fat deer, they climbed up a cliff with a hole in the wall, one that had a clear view of the sea. Vidar had climbed up second, after wiping away his footprints. "We don't have long to wait," Vali announced. "Here they come."

Vidar cupped his hands to one eye; oldest trick in the book in lieu of a spyglass. What he saw alarmed him. The boats were traveling too rapidly for his liking; the fastest wind could not carry sails like that. And they tingled with magic, VANIR magic.

"Modi's essence," he said, and then he flinched. "Forgive me, Thor's son; I did not mean to depower you on this island."

"It would only depower him if he heard you saying his real name." Vali punched Vidar with a red, dirty fist. He then picked rock out of his fingernails. Vidar rubbed the sore spot.

"They're using what they drained from him to power their boats, so they come sooner, faster than normal. They may do the same with their army, creating soldiers as invulnerable as we are."

Vali's eyebrows pricked in alarm. Then they flattened with violent calm. He got up and picked up a boulder the size of a yak's skull.

"Then we need to make sure they never reach the shore. Even the gods can drown if held under long enough."

Vidar's gesture was rough. He pulled Vali and the boulder behind the hole in the cliff, setting them down. "Thor's son told us to keep ourselves hidden. If we throw rocks that even the strongest mortals cannot bear, we may as well give away our presence."

"If you're so concerned, why don't you warn him yourself?" Vali hissed. "I enjoy having a good challenge before dinner."

Vidar let go of him and tapped the crystal clipped to his waist. "Thor's son, I don't know if you can hear me, but your enemies are here. They are using what they have taken from you." He enunciated each word clearly. "So whatever you're doing in there, do it quickly or Vali and I may have to expose ourselves. We don't want that boat to reach the shore."

The crystal vibrated. Vidar sighed.

"Gris, Guardian of the Bifrost, please help them," he said.

A horn cut through his whispering. Vali stood up again with alarm.

"That belongs to Heimdall," he said. "It's coming from the leading boat."

It was a horrid, final sound that brought the clouds to cover Dragon Island, smothering any chance of sunlight. The waves rolled around the enemy fleet, but they rose in a fury to enemy ships.

Vidar felt the ground underneath him shake. The cliff crumbled into grey rubble. Vali yanked on his arm so that they leaped to the ground before rocks crushed them; they wouldn't die, but rocks had an annoying habit of imprisoning Vanir for eons. It had happened to Thor many years ago, and Vanir still laughed about it.

The mountain that once housed the Green Death rose and started to split open. Whatever was inside would find themselves exposed to the elements, mortal or dead.

"Bother," Vali said. "That mortal knows how to use the horn."

"Then it's time to throw rocks," Vidar murmured. He bent to pick up several sizable boulders.

* * *

><p>A few minutes before, on the leading ship, Norbert had shown Alvin something interesting. They were at the stern, watching Dragon Island grow larger in the distance.<p>

Norbert pressed the button on the purple stripe twice. "I have intercepted a communication concerning the death goddess."

The Outcasts and Hysterics crowded around. Alvin snapped at them to work on the sails and make sure they didn't crash on the godforsaken rocks. Most scurried, leaving the two chiefs to listen.

"Mo? What's up?" Heluth's voice, accompanied by banging music.

"Not much. We're in the middle of a mountain next to a tunnel closed for 'renovations' despite no one having lived in this mountain since the Green Death died." Modi was sarcastic. "You wouldn't have anything to do with this, would you?"

"Dude, I'm the goddess of death, and it's Ragnorak. If I wanted to wage war on Midgard, the mountain on Dragon Island would be strategically important since it's got all that fog and mystical aspect. All the mortals would be taken off-guard. and skeletons would be dancing all over the soil."

There was a pause; the music switched off. When Modi talked again, he sounded angrier, and the anger made his accent roll.

"Lu. What the hell?"

"I'm kidding, Momo. It's just a secret project that Mom gave me permission to build. No one's used that tunnel in ages, so I'm doing some creative construction there. Once you're done with your mission, you and your friends can come visit without dying."

"These mortals aren't your pawns. Why can't you do it, if we're in your bloody realm?"

"You're not in my realm, dummy; you're all still alive, for starters. And I can't leave or I'll completely die. Call me stubborn, but I'd rather have half of me alive than all of me dead."

So she was telling the truth about that, Alvin thought with a grim smile. Pity for her.

Heluth sounded more sarcastic. "Even if I wanted to earn Odin's ETERNAL gratitude and do the restoration, I can't. I'm not related to the Green Death, and the magic wasn't deeded to me."

Norbert's nervous eye twitched, and the other widened. Alvin's eyes widened as well.

"Lu, I don't want to be manipulated. Is this actually going to prevent Ragnorak?"

"It should. Or at the least, it will make Odin happy. You can never tell when trying to stop massive disasters."

"Thank the gods you've never lied to me." He sighed. "What can you tell us?"

"For you, don't touch any water."

"What?"

"Don't touch the water if you can help it," she repeated. "Also, the Green Death went insane, but each bit of insanity was wrapped around a grain of truth. He was once a good king, but even goodness can be twisted to commit wicked deeds."

Another pause, unsettling. Only then did Modi speak, slightly calmer.

"Did you know that Jo's fate had changed?"

"No. He chose to go rescue you when I opened the back door, and I didn't see a reason to stop him." Heluth's voice became angry. "Mo, I may be the goddess of death but I wouldn't send my brother on a suicide mission. What kind of person do you think I am?"

"Sorry. I just-"

"He was a giant snake, but he was brother!" Heluth started to yell. "Every time I see his soul swim down here, I'm always going to be asking myself why I didn't make Fenris go and give Jo more time in the realms!"

This made Alvin's eyebrows raise. He didn't think the death goddess cared.

Modi didn't have a response. Then Heluth calmed herself.

"No, I shouldn't yell at you, Momo. He died saving you."

"Thanks for reminding me." More sarcasm. "Did you tell him to bring us here?"

"Well, yeah; I thought that you'd be able to gain a battle advantage and do a good deed for Odin in one sweep. I didn't think your crazy brother would be trying to kill you again and stirring fate."

"He's not my brother. I just found that out last night."

"Ouch." Then more sincerely, "That sucks."

"The truth, Lu. Why did you tell Jo to bring us to Dragon Island, which has a tunnel to the Underworld? It can't just be that you want to please Odin."

One long pause. Alvin leaned his ear closer to the phone.

"To be honest, it was so I could have you close by. I miss you."

"Oh." Modi seemed to give a wince. "Why didn't you say so? I could have come sooner. Or never left."

"You had to help your aunt with her babies, and Mom can't leave the Underworld because she's dead. At least, she couldn't leave and provide maternal care. Besides, it's not fair to making a living person stay in the Underworld."

"Fenris and Jo . . . Fenris is alive."

"Fenris is supposed to be muzzled until Ragnorak, but the Underworld serves as a substitute prison." Her tone became hard. "I've never told Mom, but I know why you freed the two of them."

"To make you happy."

"To try to stay here forever."

"Lu-"

"When you were a baby, Odin told me to put my protection on you, meaning you can't die until you fulfill your destiny. But it wasn't enough, because you didn't care about living. Not that I blame you, after Magni tried to bury you alive. I don't want to tempt you with death again, Momo, because once you're dead, that's it. You don't change, get older, or grow bigger. You don't _breathe_."

There was a snort. "Lu, the day I grow bigger is the day they genetically engineer pigs with wings."

"You haven't hit puberty yet. The future's uncertain."

"Lu, you've always been there for me." There was drumming against the phone. "You've been a better sister than Magni has ever been a brother. I'd do anything to make you happy."

"And that's the problem. You needed protecting after what Magni did to you as a baby, the way Mom protected me from becoming a monster. I'd rather if you lived than if I were happy."

"But that's because you can't leave." Modi pointed out. "You're living vicariously."

"I know. But it's also because it would hurt Mom if you died."

"I'll come back." Modi's voice was determined. "Just for a short visit. Then I'll go out and live in Midgard. And I'll keep visiting till my time comes, but I'll keep living. Deal?"

"Deal. And remember; don't touch the water, Momo."

"I won't. I love you."

"Love you too. Good luck." The phone went dead.

A large smile appeared on Alvin's face. He stood up and marched to the front of the ship. Heimdall's horn was clipped to his waist; he removed it and wiped its narrow mouth.

"It seems the goddess of death has a weakness," he told his men. "We'll find it with the boys we seek."

"Victory over death!" The Hysterics cheered.

"Shut up," he told them. "You'll get your victory soon enough."

Dragon Island's mountain was already in sight. He raised the horn to his lips and blew. The men cheered with the unsettling sound; they had received magic to strengthen their bodies and armor, to quicken their violent limbs.

Clouds and waves roared around the fleet, and the mountain started to crumble. Alvin smiled at the destruction; Woedin crawled out from under his tarp and curled around his rider. Things would end today in their favor.

Hiccup walked in the front, Toothless beside him. They had to walk because the tunnel was too narrow for flying. A fuzzy sense of denial coated every footstep, human and metal. The torch showed damp walls, giving off a slight green tinge. Mud was at the rear comforting Fishlegs with the story of the Green Death. His words bounced off Hiccup, who could not comprehend them as they lodged in his brain.

Mud told a fantastic, tragic tale of how Odin had asked for Eos and changed her from dragon to human, how the dragon king Green had swallowed a drop of Odin's magic when thinking Odin was hurting her and started to absorb every supernatural trace in the Archipelago.

Hiccup didn't believe it. He couldn't. It was too surreal. The rune stone banged against his denial.

_My mother was a dragon. She was the Green Death's favorite fledgling. That makes me his . . . _

He glanced at Toothless; the Night Fury was also concentrating on the words as they walked, absorbing their meaning. They walked closer together, as if terrified that the walls would tear them apart.

_I'm related Toothless and the babies. That makes Ivor my uncle, and Gris my aunt. _He reached a cold hand to stroke the Night Fury. _Did Ivor know that when he gave me the rune stone? Or was it just because I rode Toothless?_

He couldn't picture the Green Death capable of love, of pitying another dragon for being unable to fly or doing wicked things in a fit of insanity. That day, when he and Astrid had discovered the Nest, the Green Death's eyes were only filled with hatred and eternal hunger. Even if it weren't the size of a mountain, Hiccup wouldn't have been able to reason with it the way he had reasoned with Toothless over a matter of weeks. The pair had received no choice but to kill it with the well-placed plasma blast.

Mud had an answer for that doubt, although Hiccup didn't ask.

"I don't know when it happened, but at some point Green realized that he had gone too far. Perhaps he sensed Mum as a mortal, the way he sensed that one of Gris's children was destined to bring him down. Ivor thinks it happened after Green confined Gris to Rainbow Isle and himself to a distant island for attempting to lead a dragon rebellion. He could have killed both of his remaining children but refused to do so. But one day, Green wouldn't hold back. He knew that, just as he knew that Mum was likely to die in a dragon raid.

"So he locked himself in a mountain, separated the magic from him into a smaller entity, and made sure it was a place that he could not reach. Only thing is that magic clings to mortal and dragon souls, so that when he lost the magic, he lost any part of him that made him the former great king." His voice rang over the heads of the other Vikings. "It's a terrible thing to lose bits of yourself; it's even more terrible to not right a wrong that you have committed. Green could have restored the magic to the Archipelago if he had summoned whatever bits of sanity remained. Instead, he left that job to his kin and became a soulless beast."

"Why would Odin make a prophecy that the Green Death's children would bring him down?" Hiccup's voice was harsh. "Why turn an entire family against each other?"

Fishlegs gasped at this blasphemy. Astrid took in a sharp intake of breath.

"Don't ask me, I'm not the All-Father. If there's one thing Fath-Thor got right, it's that prophecies cause more trouble than they're worth." There was a pause, and Mud continued with how Thor struck lightning into Toothless's egg so that the baby dragon had a heartbeat. Although Odin had prophesied that a mortal would free little Night Fury, Gris told her baby to keep to the skies, out of the sight of mortals. Toothless shook his head at that, as if remembering. He gave a small, hatchling-like chirp.

_I betrayed my tribe by refusing to kill a dragon, and Odin prophesied that it would happen. He said that Toothless and I would kill our grandfather. _Hiccup gritted his teeth together. _At least, he said a mortal would, and I happened to be the mortal who could shoot a dragon out of the sky. Does that mean I filled the job requirements, or that Odin foresees great changes? _

As far as prophecies go, he could have suffered worse, given that Loki was supposed to be a murderer and catalyst for Ragnarok. And from the way Mud put it, Hiccup had managed to train a dragon without help from the gods because the gods had no power in the Archipelago. He had fulfilled the prophecy without needing good fortune, only his wits and Toothless's trust.

"Gris knew the Green Death was dead when she had a brood of five babies. She also had no idea how to raise so many, having had only one before, and Ivor didn't know how to be a father figure. So, Odin asked me to help since Gris served well as the Guardian of Rainbow Isle," Mud said. "That's why you found me there with my cousins."

"Our cousins," Hiccup said, surprised at how the words sounded on his tongue. "Does that mean we both have dragon blood?"

"Yes, and that gives us the potential to cause great change, because dragons can change fate. Not always a good thing." Mud sounded bitter. "Change isn't always accepted, especially when it doesn't make a good first impression."

"That's not a good ending," Tuffnut complained. "Isn't there supposed to be a big explosion and sparkles of happiness?"

"That happened with Fury's birth," Mud retorted. "And I told you that this story didn't have a happy ending. It doesn't even have an ending."

Hiccup's mind was whirling; he was thinking of what Vidar and Vali had said: _"Dragon's blood was spilled on the shores, dragon's blood by the gallon, so the Vanir essence won't sink into the ground." _

"Dragon's blood is the key," he muttered. The rune stone hummed against his fingers as he stroked it; Ivor's blood glued it

thoroughly to his body.

"What was that, Hiccup?" Astrid asked, breathing on his shoulder.

"Nothing." It was only a suspicion. No need to worry the others.

The green glow increased. Water ran above them along the wall, but it didn't drip. Mud's breathing became short, and Fishlegs' voice sounded whimpering.

"Maybe you could tell us another story?" he asked. "Then I won't feel so scared."

"Maybe how Magni came to betray Asgard? Or something more light-hearted?"

"Lighthearted!" Ruffnut called. "If you can summon some characters that get blown up or some more Dorothy Gale-"

Hiccup stopped. Astrid bumped into him, and Stormfly nearly toppled Toothless. More thumps and grunts from behind as the others stopped as well in the faint darkness. A faint whiff of Zippleback gas filled the air.

"Hiccup? What is it?" Astrid asked.

He didn't answer. The torch illuminated a pond in front of them, a glowing mass of emerald green. His eyes had grown as large as Toothless's and were fixed on the object in the center of the pond. The water running across the ceiling flowing to join it on the opposite wall, the end of the tunnel.

"There's something in the water," Mud said, nervous and alert. "That's why Lu told me not to touch it. It's watching us."

Hiccup walked as if in a trance. The water withdrew from him, as if it were a living, thinking creature. Toothless followed but nudged him. That broke Hiccup's trance. He stopped. The object stood still, but its presence beckoned to him. A black boot cupping the end of a limb, a limb he hadn't seen in months.

It was his left leg.

* * *

><p>"Once there was a girl half-dead, half-alive, walking in the darkness," Loki said. "She was alone in a world where souls came to decay slowly and pollute the ice-cold river. Odin's ravens occasionally flew in to give her advice, but this girl was a toddler. Half of her body was pure bone; the other was covered in flesh. She once remembered the loving arms of her mother, but at night spies had torn her away from those loving arms.<p>

"Then a woman specter came, a woman with a small baby and a distrust of Asgard. This was Eos, daughter of Green and mother to the child of fire and Thunder. Despite holding a frail child and barely holding herself together, she approached the girl who wandered and didn't know how to talk. The girl bit her, fought and clawed. Eos smelled of flowers, a foreign and soothing aroma to the girl. Eventually she

tired of fighting and slept. Eos kept soothing her and taught her to speak."

Stoick carved at the sapling. He had started with the eyes because those were what he remembered the most.

"The girl was my daughter." Loki's eyes gained the faintest gleam as he looked at the hut. "The Norns had foretold that Heluth would lead the war against the gods in Ragnorak with her brothers Jormagund and Fenris, and so Odin stole into my mistress's house, placed the woman I loved under house arrest, and took the children away. Jo was the size of a full-grown python, and Fenris was a playful puppy. They had wild moments, each biting the other, but evil? How can you judge a child, or even a young beast?"

Fenris whined and placed his head between his paws.

"I hated her," Loki said bitterly. "I hated Eos for doing what I couldn't, for making me obligated to her, for giving up prestigious life in Valhalla for a dark, damp existence in the Underworld. Favors and kindness tether those of Asgard, and favors born of love can never be repaid."

"Heluth was a little girl." Eos's voice, faint and defiant came from the hut. "She was locked in the Underworld while I spent time on Midgard, and she had done nothing wrong. I was five months pregnant, but they held me until I gave birth to Mud. I had a choice of staying in Valhalla with the other heroic dead, letting my baby grow up with heroes or taking him with me to the Underworld.

"I knew what Asgard really was, having spent years there with Freya for company; it's a place where only the strong and hearty are admired. I was a frail flower compared to the other Vanir, and especially compared to the Jotun maidens. Muddy, who was born dead and a runt, would have been treated the same way I had been treated on Asgard, especially with Jarnsaxa the Jotun mistress of Thor. So, I petitioned Odin to leave, to escape these bad influences. He asked where I could go. Loki was in Odin's great hall as well, asking to see his daughter in the Underworld.

"I couldn't leave a girl to fend for herself in a dark place, no matter how dark her destiny; I had to go to the Underworld. Odin objected, but I stood my ground and reminded him how he had taken me from Midgard without my consent as a dragon."

Stoick didn't understand this part; it interrupted his carving, however. He left a nick on the forehead, and quickly attempted to smoothen it.

"Heluth was wild, but she couldn't hurt me. I held Muddy out of the way and soothed her to sleep with lavender. It took many more days of darkness before I learned to reshape the Underworld, to make places of light and sweet-smelling gardens. Heluth needed years to gain proper speech. But she learned to speak, to argue back, to learn how to make light in the darkness. She learned how to turn the Underworld into a better place, into a home."

"So you see your wife's wonderful gift." Loki nodded at the chief's sitting figure. "She has a way with taming wild things. I found a way to visit the Underworld, and I came, intending to destroy Eos's soul.

The greatest revenge on Odin would have been to let destiny take its course, for by defining my children as the monsters of Ragnorak, and my handsome self as the instigator, he had woven his noose. Eos was upsetting that plan."

"So why didn't you?" Stoick murmured, half-listening. He was now shaving off curls for the blond hair, another similarity between the goddess and the wife he remembered.

"He came as a shadow, holding an ironwood knife. He happened to see Heluth playing with Mud, who had just been confined to the Underworld and was upset for days," Eos interjected. "I had them in a field of soft grass and daises. He saw how Lu carried my baby, was so careful with his small form. She was wild, but she knew gentleness. She knew love. Loki saw that he couldn't kill me without killing that love, and in that same instant he saw how he could repay me."

"By doing for her what she had done for me. She looked out for my daughter and then my two sons when Mud brought them to the Underworld, and I started looking out for him. And for your Hiccup as well."

"For Hiccup?"

"Come now, who do you think has been watching his intellectual growth all these years?" Loki held a momentary smirk. "Not all his brilliant comments come from his brilliant mind, innovative as he is. Gods have no power in the Archipelago, but I was always watching him, making suggestions for him to go down certain paths. Eos didn't remember him or you, since the dead have trouble remembering their existence on Midgard, but I did. It was my private joke on her."

"You might have told me," Eos said with a miffed tone. "I don't the idea of Stoick and Hiccup being alone for all those years."

"Darling, you couldn't have done anything to help them while in the Underworld, and it was more fun to see you find out on your own. The way you smashed that deceitful old man to pieces was so thrilling!"

"I shouldn't have done that." Her tone became regretful. "I lost my temper, and Alvin took it out on Mud."

Stoick wasn't listening; he carved out clothes on the sapling, delicate drapes of a fur vest and armor. Baldr stood behind him, hiding from Loki's amusement.

Gunhild recited under her breath, reading from the book of runes that Loki had smuggled from Outcast Island. The tree grew to meet Stoick's height and curved so that he could add dress folds and a breastplate. He thanked the gods for being able to touch a fragment of the World Tree, for being able to CARVE it. It was his greatest work, and for a better purpose.

"Now here comes the difficult part," Loki said. "Once you make her body frailer. We have to switch out one of the ironwood stakes for the tree, without your wife becoming a wandering ghost. If Berk hadn't been soaked with dragon blood, her soul would sink into Midgard, but she'll merely haunt the island for eternity."

Stoick looked up. Loki showed no signs of joking, even if the tone were sarcastic.

"I'm not making my wife a frail body," he said.

"In that case, I would be careful, chief. Gunhild, don't stop reciting the runes used to bind the soul to the body."

Stoick picked up the tree, careful not to disturb his handiwork. It was an almost exact replica of the woman in Bucket's painting and his own carvings, except that this woman's hair flowed less strongly and her hands were longer, artist's hands. Her expression was gentle, and her legs were skinny. The statue wore no boots, Stoick's sole concession to Loki's demands.

He followed the trickster god inside to the bottom level of the hut, where he saw his wife trapped in the ironwood circle. She was transparent and white, but she was his Val, and she recognized him. Loki gestured at him to grab one of the stakes that had remained lodged in the barren soil. Stoick took a firm grip and held his breath. It felt like an ordinary metal stake.

Gunhild's voice grew louder; Ardis joined her so that the wind around the ironwood swirled.

"Loki, if I survive this, I am going to kill you for not helping me remember about Hiccup," Eos said.

"You won't survive this," Loki assured her, "because you're not properly alive. Yet."

"Alvin's going to hurt Mud." Val looked to Stoick. "He's going to make him suffer to blackmail Heluth. He wants the death goddess's loyalty for Ragnorak."

Loki's amusement vanished. "Over my dead body."

Stoick grunted. He buried his anger for the moment. Gunhild and Ardis's harmony reached their climax.

"Now!" Loki shouted, and Stoick made the switch. Dirt and rock crumbled. Eos's white form smashed into the carving, making it glow with impossible brilliance. Stoick turned away from the glare, but it still blinded him.

He didn't let go of the carving, putting both arms around it now. The tree was moving in his arms, breathing. He screwed up his eyes, feeling tears come down from the pain.

Breath, human breath that smelled of wildflowers warmed his beard. Then the wooden lips pressed against him, and he pressed back. Stoick's eyes burnt, but he was not just crying from the pain.

* * *

><p>Mud couldn't see why they had stopped, but he had a horrible idea. Fishlegs was crushing both his hands with one meaty, sweaty grasp, so he couldn't answer the message on his phone, though it seemed to come from the boys.<p>

The water running on the ceiling above them disturbed him. First, water didn't do that. Second, he swore that it whispered, that some active energy flowed with the green. The whispers did not sound happy. Third, it was getting harder for him to move. Not just because an overweight Viking was clutching him for dear life. His bare feet stuck to the ground with each step, and his muscles felt like heavy chains.

His essence was growing back, which meant that Alvin could pin him to the spot again. That was not supposed to happen till he was asleep, asleep for days.

Don't touch the water.

"Is that what I think it is?" Astrid asked from ahead.

"Only one way to find out," Hiccup responded.

"Hiccup!" Mud shrieked. "Your promise! Think before you put yourself in danger!"

He didn't know if his older brother was actually doing something stupid, and he couldn't know with all those helmets and dragon heads blocking his vision. But instinct and memory of the past few days surged through.

"But you killed the Green Death, Hiccup!" Astrid argued. "It didn't even know who you were when it lost its soul."

"Then how do you explain that, Astrid?" Hiccup was pointing at something.

"Fishlegs, I need to see what's going on," Mud said. "And someone's trying to call me. Do you mind?"

Fishlegs did mind, but he was a gentleman for a Viking. So Mud was able to ease the nervous hands off and push his way forward, apologizing to each dragon and human as he squished. There was no room with which to pull out his rainbow phone and answer the call. The green glow followed him from above, along with a strong rattling from the rocks.

"When Heluth was talking to Mud both times, she was saying HE had to restore magic to the Archipelago," Hiccup said. "That's because Heluth thought that Mud was Eos's only son. The Green Death must have deeded his magic to an heir of Eos."

Mud pushed the twins apart as their Zippleback hissed at them. He stumbled as the ground shook.

"But Mud isn't the oldest. I am." The footsteps resumed with steady determination.

"Hiccup!" Mud cried, just as he made it to Astrid. He would have gone forward, except the water nearly reached the edge of his big toe. He jumped back. "That amount of magic will drive you insane, if it doesn't blow you to bits first! It's not a proper deed; it's a trap!"

Hiccup kept walking forward, Toothless beside him. The water parted from him as if he were a small and skinny Moses and gathered in two parallel blocks of drown-worthy wetness.

Mud looked to the spare limb, and to Hiccup's prosthetic. Realization dawned in his horrified eyes.

"Normally it would be a trap," he called back. "But I have a bit more protection than most mortals. Thanks to you, Mud. I owe you one."

"Uh, guys?" Fishlegs called from the rear. "I think the mountain is collapsing."

"Oh great. And we don't even have an escape route," Ruffnut commented.

"Hiccup!" Mud pulled out his sword. Oh, to have the courage to ignore a supernatural warning! "Harmful, protect my brother!"

The sword obeyed by flying forward. By then Hiccup had received the strange leg in the center of the pond. He held onto Toothless with one hand while reaching for the glowing, familiar object.

"I deed this magic to the Archipelago," he said, before inserting his metal prosthetic into the leg. Flesh and cloth merged just as Harmful reached them and shot rainbow lights at the boy's feet. Hiccup's eyes closed, and he slumped against Toothless. Harmful circled them like a hummingbird with a machine gun.

That's when the ceiling started to cave in. The water running across it fell in heavy droplets, and they had chosen a target. As the ceiling split open and bright light hit every human and dragon in the eye, wet shards of green hit Mud. He collapsed, essence fully restored and limbs completely paralyzed.

The pond cascaded on him as Harmful tried to shoot rainbow light at him, to evacuate him. If only he had removed the ironwood cuffs!

Great, he thought, coughing bubbles as the blocks of water pressed him to the dirt floor. _The Green Death's soul was in the water, and now it's trying to drown me. No wonder Heluth was worried._

25. Chapter Twenty-Four

Gris saw everything, and she could do nothing. Teleport weapons to the Vanir youth, yes. Warn them about the horde of dragons that flew over their carefully made traps. But teleport them out of there?

Not without Mud. She would not leave him to the mercy of those Outcasts or her father.

Her bulky form stood in front of the Bifrost. Freya had an arm over her bandaged wings. They watched with anxiety. Harmful and the crystals blinked with alarm.

FATHER! She spoke through the crystals. DON'T KILL MY NEPHEW! HE'S ONLY A FLEDGLING!

No response from the water. Green had never listened to her, back when she had been the dragon who cried DANGER!

Hiccup, the mortal who had freed her little Fury and protected her family, HAD to have found out he had to restore magic to the Archipelago. He had to put so much faith in that little rune stone that Mud had carved for Ivor. It was cracking at the corners, doing its best to shield his mind from the magic and memories flowing through him. At worse, the magic would carry his soul with it through the earth and leave his body an insane corpse. At best?

HE NEEDS MORE DRAGON'S BLOOD. She whispered with fear.

"Gris?" Freya asked in a soft undertone.

YOU NEED TO DRAW BLOOD FROM ME, FREYA. THEN I WILL TRANSFER IT TO HIS RUNE STONE. IT'S THE ONLY WAY IT WILL LAST.

"What?"

HE NEEDS DRAGON'S BLOOD, BLOOD OF THE GREEN DEATH'S KIN.

Freya stood away from her, shaking her head.

"Your wings aren't healed. You'll die," she said. "After what happened with your sister, I swore to never raise a healing hand to spill blood."

THEN I SACRIFICE THE WINGS AND BLOOD IN MY WINGS, Gris said; she bent her large black snout and bit the Bifrost. Its images crackled, and the light wavered. Still she bit and lifted her head.

A crystal broke off, gleaming red and yellow. She barked at it, and it pierced her bandaged wings.

GO TO THE BOY'S RUNE STONE. FILTER HIS SOUL FROM THE MAGIC. PROTECT HIM.

A glow; Gris collapsed against the Rainbow Bridge. The images became cracked, almost blurry. Her wings had vanished, and her back was bleeding profusely.

Freya screamed, started calling for help. There was a trampling of large feet and smelly boots. Her hands cradled a head large enough to bite off a mountain.

Gris managed to lift her head. She saw Vanir dressed in battle armor and wielding swords. They must have sensed the magic returning to the Archipelago and the need to protect Asgard. With the Bifrost damaged, however and with her bulk guarding it, they would not be able to journey and aid Vali and Vidar. Men and women growled angrily at the dragon.

"Useless reptile!" one of them shouted.

Gris did not care. She saw the boy breathing, even as a thousand years coursed through him. Her blood formed a large spot on his tunic around the rune stone, pulsing and throbbing. She prayed that it would be enough.

* * *

><p>It was the shaking and rough beard that made Eos realize what had happened. Gods, she had form. She was breathing. She was . .
<p>

Alive.

She pressed harder against Stoick. Wood and skin had merged into a light brown color. It was _her_ skin, and she hadn't kissed any man like this in ages. She and Loki had tried once in the Underworld- afterword Loki had to dive into a volcano to unfreeze his lips, and Heluth had made hideous retching sounds during the ordeal- but they weren't attracted to each other. Loki may have been a small Vanir, but he was Vanir. He liked bigger, stronger women.

More shaking broke her kiss from Stoick. She lifted her hands- wooden hands, but still hands- away from his face. Leaves swirled between her fingers. He still had his arms around her waist. Thank the gods he had carved clothing for her, or this would be embarrassing.

"You taste like mint and tree bark," he said. He pressed his lips against her textured forehead, against the nick he had made.

"You taste like Berk," she responded. "Like home and fire."

"Are you two done, or are you going to get a hut?" Loki asked.

That killed the mood. Eos turned from Stoick and took her first footstep in years. Flowers sprouted where she stepped, with bare wooden feet. A trail of red and yellow flowers followed her. In the shadows, four dragon fledglings watched with interest. Gris's children. She wobbled toward Loki with a hard look. He caught her.

"Don't think about slapping me, darling; you'll fall over. Save it for later, when you're less of a mermaid on land."

Eos glared and grounded her feet. Leaves sprouted up, holding her in place. Then she whirled and slapped him, hard. Loki recoiled.

"Ow! Darling!"

"That was for rescuing me instead of my sons," she said. Then she pressed her hand to the red cheek and cooled it with green mist. He sighed in relief. "That was for looking out for them when I couldn't."

They felt the ground shake. Then all heard the sound of a horn. He covered his cheek and backed away.

"Ho boy," he said.

"Earthquake?" Stoick asked.

"Archipelago being restored of its essence," Loki sighed. "That means the gods have power on Midgard again, hip hip hooray."

"Why so morose?"

"It means that the guardian of the Bifrost will have her hands full and be unable to teleport us anywhere. The second sound was Heimdall's horn, which your enemy Alvin stole from Heimdall's body," Loki said. "Also, darling, your boys are in danger and we can't teleport to the island."

Thornado approached Stoick; Eos jumped on seeing the large dragon. It came to closer, and she stroked it with both hands.

"There is always the exciting route," she said. "But we can't do it alone."

It took very slow footsteps; she was not used to gravity pulling on her. Nor was she used to having to push tree branches out of the way.

"Here, Mrs. Chief. Let me." It was Snotlout of all people who offered his hands. She took them; he helped her walk.

"You've grown well," Eos said with praise. "You look so handsome."

"You look so . . . woody." Snotlout had to think to find the next few words. "Since you're good with plants and flowers, do you know anything that would help Hookfang?"

"Hookfang?"

"My dragon." He sounded worried. "He's not getting up, though he's breathing, and I'm supposed to be the back-up. For Hiccup and the others. If they're in danger--"

"I have just the thing for dragons." She assured him. They stopped several feet from Thor and Magni's body. "Stay back. This is something I need to do on my own."

Snotlout had survival instincts; he backed away as she clomped to the blond god.

"Thor." She reached and clasped his shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss. But you must put aside your grief. We need you."

He didn't respond. This man had been destined to lie with her, and he didn't respond.

"Magni's death must not be in vain; if you want to stop the world from ending, you must fix his mistakes. Fight the Outcasts with Mjollnir's help. Save your other son."

"He's not my son," Thor responded. "He's a mortal changeling."

Stoick charged, Loki trying to hold him back, but Eos struck first. She smacked the back of Thor's head. It wasn't a hard blow, even for Vanir, but it was enough to make Stoick stop. His neck twisted, and he stood up to confront her, after placing Magni's body on the ground.

"You hit me!" he said, face contorted with anger. "You little

weakling; how dare you? I didn't even feel it!"

"Good. That means it's working," she said coolly.

"What is?"

"Call it a salve on your grief; you won't feel intense sadness and loss for a few hours. One of Freya's tricks. Fate is unraveling because you didn't lie with me when you should have, and because I didn't seek you out in Asgard." She took a deep breath. "We both made critical mistakes in our youth. After this, we will go our separate ways and never speak of it, but for now, save my son. Save Midgard. Correct Magni's wrongs."

"Why?"

"Jarnsaxa will lose her favor in Asgard, having a treacherous son. I do not participate, but some of the stupider Vanir may blame her for Magni's wrongdoings. If you redeem him in your name, you can defend her from Odin and the Vanir's wrath. Do it for her, if not for Magni."

Loki gave a low laugh. Eos heard him whisper to Stoick: "I'm a bad influence on her."

Thor took more deep breaths. He grabbed his hammer, gave Magni an apologetic look.

"At least keep his body preserved for a hero's funeral," he said, voice choking. "Don't let the flies eat him before we can burn a boat for him."

Eos nodded. She gestured with her hands. Thick, woody vines sprung slowly from the ground. They dripped sap over the corpse, sap that hardened into amber. Magni was encased in orange crystal, which gleamed like a glass coffin.

Thor squeezed her hand in thanks. He whirled his hammer, and the skies roared with thunder. Battle clung to his face, and he charged for the black clouds.

"What a drama queen," Loki called after him. "You still have to know where we're going, big brother."

Eos simply shrugged. Her hair was amazingly long and wavy, despite being wood as well, and the wind tore at it. She picked up her wooden feet and walked to the bulky Viking boy.

"You hit Thor!" Snotlout was impressed and shocked. "Mrs. Chief- uh, Valhallarama- you-"

"She hit me also," Loki said. "What, I'm not that important?"

"I've been wanting to do that for a long time," Eos said with an angry smile. "Now take me to your dragon; adrenaline will make him effective 'back-up'."

* * *

><p>In the Underworld, Heluth sat up straight. She was in the special

project room, sharing a nervous drink with the construction workers. She clenched her hard cider and sipped the foam like a child. Although not in the main chamber in which souls came via river, she sensed someone in Helheim's Gate was on the border between life and death.<p>

"Not today," she said, and moved her skeletal fingers. It was a twitch, but that twitch sent the soul crashing back into its body, tethering it to mortal form. Whether he'd regain consciousness then, she'd never know.

Once, she had seen this soul teetering between life and death. It could have gone either way, and she had pushed it towards life. The Green Death, once in a fit of insanity, had told her servants- the ones who came to explore the mountain, the ones who could leave- that its death would have a price. Whoever, or whatever killed it, would pay with what made them strong. The servants, mere walking skeletons, had preserved that message in a water flask, and brought it to her.

Heluth had known that the day she had spared this soul before. A skinny body falling in a mass of fire, a falling dragon swooping to catch it. That day, Mud was fencing with Heimdall by the Bifrost, and Eos had been tending Fenris, who had gotten into a tussle with Jo. She had been by herself, watching the battle between the small boy and the larger dragon.

She could have let him die that day, let him fall to the ground and splatter. Others had died on these waters, stupid Vikings sailing into fog.

Except . . . he had green, intelligent eyes. Brown hair that fell in untidy tufts behind his ear. Warm, sacrificial love for the creature he was riding. He had reminded her too much of Modi, of Modi once he had a growth spurt.

She had thought of how she'd feel if Modi died fighting a dreaded enemy. How it would have felt to lose the small boy she called "little brother."

Heluth hadn't borne the thought well. She had dug her hands into the ice-cold Underworld, river, had pushed his soul back to life, and his left leg, which helped his Fury fly, had disappeared on Midgard. That satisfied the Green Death's condition, because he hadn't known about prosthetics.

That was why Hiccup had never complained about losing his leg, though he never liked others mentioning it. Some part of him realized that it was the death goddess's form of payment for his life.

Heluth realized something else now. Modi had touched the water. Not intentionally; she heard Heimdall's horn and realized what damage it would have caused, what damage it was causing now. The treacherous Outcast was trying to break open the Underworld, was attacking her cousin!

First, she took a large sip of cider. Throat burning, she faced the construction workers. So many undead souls had to cover Eos's duties, from cooking dinner in the brick ovens to tending the gardens of eternal paradise. Her mask and bony half of her face gleamed with

fury.

"Some heathens are threatening my foster brother," she said, eyes cold. "Fight off the ones with potatoes on their flag and rescue Modi, son of Thor and Eos. Happy hour will be extended to those who take down more than ten men at a time."

The construction workers, varying in wholeness from pure skeletons to demonic flesh and horns, cheered. They gulped their shots and grabbed their weapons. Heluth kept the cold smile pasted to her face, even when fear clenched her guts.

* * *

><p>It would have been so easy to give up. The Vanir had stronger lungs than mortals did, but even they had to drown at some point, and water was not Mud's element. He could have lain on the dirt floor with a few hundred gallons of water on top of him and let his cheeks turn blue from oxygen deprivation.<p>

He couldn't. Not just because he had promised to live. Facing the cloudy sky, he saw Alvin riding on the stitched up Whispering Death, the twins' frightened comments, Astrid's dragon attempting to blast the water to free him. Their leader, his STUPID thinking brother, was breathing but barely conscious, registering the catastrophes around them with glazed eyes. Harmful had its blade full protecting him and Fury from the metal darts, probably meant as sedatives. It didn't have time to help the other kids as four Changewings materialized. Mud hadn't given the order to evacuate.

They needed Mud. He had to live it . He couldn't move, but he could do SOME magic.

So Mud gritted his teeth, blew out his breath to make a large bubble around his head, and shouted, "GRANDFATHER!"

The green gathered into two large orbs. The water pressed around his bubble but did not burst it. He had several minutes of air. Its words rippled with sound.

_Son of Eos. Child of . . . Fire . . . _

"Also Thunder," Mud said, and he coughed out water. His nose burned, and his lungs were racked. Yet he was alive. For the moment.

You're . . . tiny.

If not for the coughing and precious oxygen, Mud would have screamed with frustration. He was being drowned by a fractured dragon's soul, watching his brother's friends fall, and the soul only cared about his SIZE? What was the matter with his family?

And young. Must . . Kill you.

"Why?"

Eos . . . lost her. Lost my fledgling. She . . Died. Never came back.

"Oh, I see." Mud tried to reduce his sarcasm. "That was Thor's fault."

Not mine."

Your . . . fault. You . . . exist. She does not. Unfair.

Great. Nutty as a fruitcake but much more powerful.

"Eos loves me!" Mud insisted. "Even when dead, she raised me in the Underworld! If anything happened to me, her heart would break!"

_Anything? _That seemed to reduce the hostility.

"That bad man trying to pierce your watery soul, he's captured her," Mud explained, watching as Alvin's dragon shot spines through the wave towards him. The green glow knocked them aside "He wants me as well, to use against her. If I can just drain myself in your water and lead him into the Underworld, Heluth can finish him off and I can rescue Mum from him."

You would . . . give up your Vanir essence to fight?

"I'd renounce Asgard just so he doesn't have power over me! I'd rather die free than live under his power, so I could help Mum!"

He . . . took it from you. Part of your soul.

Thor Almighty, Alvin seemed to realize that ironwood would pierce the watery bulk. Green formed a large bubble around Mud's head as the oxygen disappeared.

"I will make the sacrifice," Mud said hurriedly. "I'm not afraid to die helpless. I'll carry you to the Underworld, so you can see Mum once I rescue her."

This was the truth; the Green Death's soul was decayed, but it was a soul, and Heluth would be happy to help repair it. Who knows, maybe Mum could help with her soft hands and healing touch.

I would . . . like that. To see . . . Eos. But-

"But?"

_ You are foolish, willingly losing bits of yourself. It's not . . . pleasant. Eos would . . . would not want that._

"I don't have a choice. "

He shouldn't have said that; the orbs gleamed with an almost wicked pleasure. Its sentences became more coherent, and the soul seemed to regain sanity for a moment.

_You will always be under his power, for he can always deprive you and control you. I cannot let that happen. _

The bubble burst, and the green glow forced itself into Mud. He tried to turn his head, but it forced itself into his mind. A shot of water aimed for his belt, cutting away the water flask from his frozen limbs.

_This is my gift to you, Eos's son; you can never be drained again.

Know how to use that, and let me see her again. _

"No!" Mud gasped, swallowing water, but already the wave and green light took him away from the fighting, back out the tunnel. If the mountain hadn't been broken open, the riders and their dragons would have drowned, but they managed to hover in the exposed air and avoid the wave.

"Mud!" Astrid screamed, just as dragon nip darts hit Stormfly. She came down with the large splash, attempted to reach for him. The wave flowed past her outstretched fingers, and Mud couldn't have reached anyway. He couldn't move a muscle below his neck.

It deposited him in front of the blocked-up tunnel saying 'closed for renovation'. He coughed and vomited water, still prone and paralyzed. Mud tried, but he couldn't drain himself; the water wouldn't accept his essence. It batted against his fingers before flowing through the cracks in the walls. The flask lay a useless distance away.

Of all times to receive this "gift"! If Mud had known only a few days ago, he would have given his left hand to receive it, but now-

Alvin landed, hopped off his dragon and approached slowly. Mud tried to get up, to show he wasn't going to go down without a fight, but his arms and legs wouldn't move.

"Come now, son, you're not afraid of me?" Alvin opened his large hands as if to parley. Mud saw the ironwood manacles hanging from his belt, cuffs inscribed with reverse Fehu. Like the bracelet for Magni.

"I'm terrified," Mud said with a burning throat. "But I'm still going to stop you."

Alvin's laugh echoed across the collapsed tunnel. The cloudy sky beamed on Mud like an unwanted wool blanket, as if it too were laughing.

"You? Stop me? Maybe if you hadn't let me take your essence a few days ago, I'd believe you. But now-"

He clenched his fist. Mud screamed; his muscles started to cramp in his groin, in the men's sensitive spot. He couldn't writhe, and that seemed to make the pain worse. It was as if a bad-tempered crab had decided to go _there_.

Yes, the Green Death had been nutty as a fruitcake and dangerous as a cornered serpent. Those qualities always implied a terrible combination. The worst was that he had been trying to _help_.

Alvin laughed again and unclenched his fists. The pain stopped. Sweat gathered on Mud's gasping face.

"You won't stop me, Modi. You don't have the guts. And your little dragon-riding entourage will fall soon."

He took large steps, the dragon following with suspicious eyes and fresh stitches. Mud's hands collapsed to his sides, and Alvin grabbed one of them. The ironwood manacles clicked around his small wrists.

26. Chapter Twenty-Five

Things can always get worse, Astrid thought. An army of four invisible dragons and invisible Vikings on them, Alvin the only visible one. Seemed to think he was invincible, not needing protection from the Berk riders, with that stupid horn. Its trill made her braid and spine shudder. Every time he blew on it, more mountain collapsed. What an arrogant son of a-

Metal darts shot through the air. One hit Stormfly on the neck, piercing her thick scales. The dragon immediately collapsed and crashed to the ground. Astrid wasn't hurt, but Stormfly gave a muffled moan. Yelps from Fishlegs and the twins as their dragons also went down with wet splashes. Rubble would have toppled on them, but their crystals shot out light to catch the falling rocks as the mountain continued to split open.

Astrid gasped as that large wave dragged a glowing Mud away. Not that she could have reached for him, because his hands wouldn't move, and there was Stormfly to worry about. He shot her a wild panicked expression before vanishing down the crumbling tunnel.

Alvin flew above them, barking orders at the Changewings. It seemed to be for "capture," not for "kill". That was the good news. The bad news was that he was following the wave, eyes on the trapped figure within.

"Come back and fight, you coward!" Astrid shouted at him. She pulled her axe from where it was strapped to her back, prepared to fling it at the Outcast's head. His Whispering Death shot spines in response, making her dodge them. They barely missed Stormfly, though only because the Nadder's tail shot spines in turn. Her dragon was down but not out for the count.

Fishlegs yelped in warning. The Changewings materialized although their riders hadn't. Green acid shot at the Berk riders, who had to dodge. Weapons appeared in mid-air; a large, double-headed axe aimed towards Astrid and Stormfly. Astrid bent her knees and held her own axe at the ready.

"Everyone, hand to hand combat! Protect your dragons!" she called, just as the double-headed axe attempted a vicious swing at her head. She ducked, felt the sharp air swoop over her head, and spun a distance from Stormfly. She beckoned with her left hand.

"Come on, you invisible creep! Bet you're ugly and wart-faced under all the Changewing skin!"

Astrid wasn't Hiccup, but her heckling worked. The axe came for her instead of Stormfly, and she backed away to gain more room for combat. The tunnel was still narrow, and the Changewings kept spitting acid at the rocks, widening them.

No dragons to fight dragons, but all Berk riders-sans Hiccup- had received warrior training. Fishlegs shielded Meatlug from the Changewing acid with his body, holding a large hammer and screaming. His eyes were bloodshot, and the gaping holes in his shirt made him look more terrifying. He threw his hammer at a Changewing who could

not dodge in time, and it returned to his fist. The dragon went down with a broken wing. The other Changewings retreated; apparently they felt no loyalty in the time of battle.

It's always the bookish ones, Astrid thought, blocking another blow aimed at her shoulder. It was a strong swing, making her stumble. Her attacker seemed to realize how much difference strength made when battling with axes. She barely had time to regain her footing when he slashed at her stomach. This time, when she blocked the blow, an invisible hand punched her cheek. As she recoiled, it then swiped at her legs, knocking away balance. She went down, felt the axe blade at her throat.

"Dishonorable!" she croaked as that same hand grabbed her braid and lifted her. The axe made her move to the damp rock wall where she was pinned. It swung back, ready to slice her neck open.

The sound of spines shooting through the air, a yell, and the axe clattered to the ground. Astrid picked it up and went to where the spines were moving on the ground. She swiftly cut away the Changewing skin without nicking the man's real skin, ripped off his mask in bits. No time to save it for Hiccup to analyze later.

"Thank you for giving us a new training exercise. And you are an ugly Viking." She smirked at his cursing face, turned the double-headed axe, and hit him with the blunt head twice. Then she stood up and ran back to her prone dragon.

Stormfly was sedated but not down; she had shot the spines with her tail. She warbled with drowsy concern at the red mark on Astrid's cheek.

"I'm all right, girl." Astrid patted Stormfly on the left side, the same spot where she had hit the Nadder all those months ago. "A bruise for a bruise. Let's see where else you can aim."

They studied the battleground. The remaining invisible warriors had decided not to attack the Berserk teenager who weighed as much as his dragon, after Fishlegs caught every of their weapons. He soon amassed a large pile. They then focused their energy on the rainbow sword that circled Hiccup and Toothless, firing rows of darts. Toothless retaliated with plasma blasts as the sword's circling wavered. Harmful was wavering, however, and Astrid didn't blame it. If she had to defend her stupid boyfriend in the middle of battle and not have back-up-

The twins stood in front of their dragon, making sure neither Barf nor Belch lost their heads. They worked in tandem to protect each other, each with a hatchet instead of an axe. Even so, neither of them managed to land a blow against the single warrior attacking them and the Zippleback. In fact, they managed to hit each other more often. Astrid suspected they were doing it on purpose.

"We're actually winning!" Fishlegs cried out with bloodlust. He shook his burning fist. "We may get out of here alive!"

That's when they heard Mud's scream and Alvin's laughter. That killed the battle mood. The twins lowered their weapons in confusion. Even the warriors' weapons stopped, hesitating, because it wasn't a scream of terror, but of agony. Mud's voice hadn't broken yet, making his

shrieks shrill.

Despite her chilled heart, Astrid observed, and she whispered to her dragon, pointed at where the weapons aimed. Stormfly lifted her tail. They couldn't help Mud if they lost.

"It sounds like he's castrating the kid," one invisible warrior said. "I know he's a supernatural brat, but-"

"Now!" Astrid shouted, pointing at the weapons. Stormfly shot her spines with almost panicking fury. Fishlegs dodged, and there were rows of struggling invisible shapes.

"We need to help Mud!" he shouted.

"First we need to help ourselves!" Ruffnut shouted; she and her brother sprinted from the Changewings who landed around the spines. "Their stupid protective instinct is kicking in."

For once Ruffnut was right. The Changewings now worked as a team to separate the kids from their dragons; Fishlegs didn't move, but Astrid and the twins did. Green acid burnt the floor beneath their sprinting feet. They met spines with more acid, burning them mid-air.

"LJOS BRYMJA AKDIS!" Mud's voice shrieking words, even as it was strained with pain. "Protect the Berk riders and their dragons. Strike me-" There was scuffling as his voice quieted, then a yell from Alvin before Mud continued. "Strike me down if you see me. Don't hold back!"

The clouds pulsed with thunder; four bolts of lightning shot down. The Changewings looked up in alarm.

"Helmets off!" Astrid cried, remembering that metal attracted lightning. She had a headband, but there was clattering as the twins tugged at each other's horns and tossed them. Fishlegs let his tiny helmet bounce off the pinned Outcasts and Hysterics. They braced themselves, standing by their dragons.

They had nothing to worry about; the lightning struck the Changewings, hitting their tails. Squawking with alarm, their protective instincts failed; the lightning chased them away from the mountain, out into the distance.

"That's not possible!" Alvin screamed, as Astrid heard more bolts of lightning strike their way. "I've bound you with ironwood; you're completely helpless!"

"Not completely." Defiance and pain in Mud's voice. "Astrid, get yourself and the others out! The lightning will protect you"

"Call them off, son of Thor!"

A pause, Mud's voice struggling.

"No."

"Call them off!" Another scream from Mud that made Astrid's heart pound.

"No!"

"You're bound by spell! I order you to call the lightning off!" There was grunting from Mud, resistance.

"I relinquish freedom of the clouds!"

"Oh gods. 'Ljos Brymjá' means light and thunder," Fishlegs said, looking smaller without his tiny helmet. "He talked to the lightning, and now he's given up control of it!"

That's when Astrid understood. Child of Fire and Thunder. Her expression became horrified. Dena vu coursed through her veins. She ran down the tunnel, but lightning shot in front of her.

"Mud, call it off!" she called. "The lightning will strike you!"

"Don't . . . worry! Take care of Harmful!" he shouted back, and then his cries became muffled. More crashing and they heard Alvin's large footsteps fade.

* * *

><p>Heluth knew things had gone wrong before her phone rang. She knew because her soldiers called with reports of the tunnel collapsing. So inconvenient to make them support the volatile rock, delaying Modi's rescue. The warriors had to be structural rather than aggressive, much to their chagrin.<p>

Then her phone rang for the hundredth time, and his caller ID came up. Her hand automatically pressed the rune on the purple strike.

"I'm working on it," she snapped at him. "That stupid Outcast is trying to cave us in; give us a few minutes to stabilize."

"Not many people live after calling me 'stupid,' Heluth. Ever wonder why?"

She dropped the phone. Her bouncer, who had been hovering over with concern, caught it. Cold laughter came from the crystal, unwanted and familiar.

"Not so talkative when taken by surprise, are you?"

"What are you doing with my cousin's property?"

"Negotiating," Alvin said calmly. "Are you aware of your part in Ragnorak, to raise armies of the undead to fight?"

"Ragnorak isn't happening," she told him. "Fighting is such a drag. Where is my cousin?"

"You lied to me, death goddess, and I don't like liars. I swore on the Loki tree not to mess with minds or souls, but I said nothing about physical pain." There was a smack and a muffled grunt.

"Mo," she said, her tone exposing fright.

"It's amazing how much pain you can put a god through, when you own a bit of him. Ironwood manacles also help."

This wasn't supposed to happen; Modi was supposed to restore the Green Death's magic, get rewarded with his essence restored, and get free of this arrogant mortal. Something had gone wrong.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"What I've wanted from the beginning: your allegiance. Your armies at my beck and all."

"And if I pledge both to you, you won't hurt him?"

She heard a faint, muffled voice of protest, and then it stopped. Mo must have realized that making any sound wouldn't help.

"As long as you don't trick me. Or lie to me."

"Then you need to see me in person, to make the oath binding," she frowned. "And I need to see my cousin unharmed. Let me talk to him."

"What?"

"I need to know that he's with you."

There was an unwrapping of cloth, a face slammed against the phone, causing static. "Lu." Mud's voice, hoarse and gritty.

"Mo. Has he hurt you?"

"Not badly." Mo was a terrible liar. "You're going to go through with this. You're going to pledge the undead to him."

"You promised me that you'd live. I didn't mean a life of pain." Her voice tinged with regret. If Jo hadn't brought him and the hiccup here. If the army hadn't had those construction problems. If, if-

Modi took a ragged deep breath. "You're going to have to do the formal 'seal the deal with the drink.' Old-fashioned rules, you know."

"Yeah. Any requests?" she asked sarcastically to hide her fear and confusion. Usually a phone pledge would do.

"A Reverse Trojan."

"What?"

"A Reverse Trojan. Three parts ciders for the color, one part tonic water, a splash of blueberry juice for misdirection, and shaken for a long time on the rocks. A long, long time."

Modi hated cider. He also didn't think fruits and alcohol should mix. He was trying to tell her something.

"A Reverse Trojan. Got it," she said. "Don't let him hurt you

anymore."

"Then I won't speak disrespectfully." Another smack, and she heard Modi grunt. Heluth winced. Alvin returned.

"Tell your soldiers not to attack, and have them bring us to a place for parley. We're in one of your tunnels, waiting."

"Understood. No attacking and parley," she recited, nervous. "I'll send someone over. See you in a few minutes." She hung up before he could respond.

Heluth sat back, skeletal fist under her chin. Alvin had her cousin, a resurrected Whispering Death, and stolen essence. She had to deal with all three, as well as Mud's message. "Trojan" often referred to sneaking in using an outer disguise, usually a present. Misdirection. Time.

The construction workers milled around her. Her bouncer poured her a fresh cider. She looked at them, and she looked at her rainbow phone.

"Here's the plan," she said.

* * *

><p>"Oh mother Frigga!" Astrid cursed. She couldn't let the lightning strike her, not if she wanted to help. Hiccup and Mud didn't need a barbecued shield-maiden. Curse her practical mind!<p>

The lightning herded her back to Fishlegs and the twins, and it pulsed around them in electric bars. Different bolts encased their dragons, not that Stormfly or the twins' Zippleback could move. Dragon nip was potent stuff.

Hiccup through all this had remained silent. He still stood with Toothless supporting him like a green statue, as if the left leg that he had put on tethered him to the ground.

Some bolts struck the invisible Outcasts, and the visible ones, stunning them. The injured Changewing shrieked as it got electrocuted. Stormfly squawked in alarm.

"He saved us," Fishlegs whimpered as dragon flesh fried in front of them. "From the Changewings."

"Some rescue," Tuffnut said, "trapping us with lightning."

"It's like we're in an electric cage," Ruffnut said. She put out her hand to demonstrate, and yelled with a thrill as the lightning forced her back. "Now that is a shock!"

"Can you find a way out?" Astrid asked them. She normally wouldn't ask the twins to fry their brains, but this was an emergency, and they were good at frying their brains.

"We can try!" The twins slapped high-fives to each other and charged forward. The electric bolts knocked them back, and they cheered. Then they charged again.

And again. And _again_.

"Stop it!" Astrid cried after the fifth time. "It's not working."

"The bolts must be at a lower voltage, so as not to harm us but to repel us," Fishlegs volunteered. "Like having a Terrible Terror rather than a Night Fury bite you."

Astrid let forth a stream of curses. That's when the sky sucked up the bolts. They fled upward, as if returning to a stern master. Who knows, perhaps they were.

Everyone looked up, and their jaws dropped. A flash, and the ground became scorched. Fishlegs looked like he was going to faint. The invisible Vikings gave identical cries of surprise.

"I guess Thor Almighty heard your curses," Tuffnut said.

Thor didn't actually appear, and who did didn't surprise them. It was his entourage's choice of vehicles: lightning bolts. Stoick and Snotlout on their dragons as well as a woman who seemed to be made of wood were straddling the lightning. They were riding lightning bolts as if they were explosive horses. Thornado lay on his bolt, while Hookfang wrapped claws around his. The woman sat behind Stoick and clutched him.

The lightning returned to the sky, and they heard it hit more than one Outcast and Hysteric. Twin cheers from Vali and Vidar, and the clang of steel as they joined in active combat.

"That _was_ the exciting route," Stoick commented to the woman. "How did you know Thor could do that?"

"I was in Asgard for several hundred years. You pick things up."

"She also had me." Loki appeared from behind Eos, unfolding himself from a shadowy form. "I've wanted to try that for ages."

"Woo-hoo!" Snotlout hopped off a revived Hookfang. "Don't you guys worry. Your backup is here."

"Good energy, Snotlout, but we already took care of the problems in here," Fishlegs said. He indicated the struggling spines and the dead Changewing. "We could have used you about twenty minutes ago."

"What?" Snotlout looked from face to haggard face. "You didn't even leave ONE murderous barbarian for me?"

"No," Astrid told him, unsympathetic. "We didn't have time with all the axes they were swinging at our throat."

"Go outside, ally with Thor and those two boys against the invaders," Stoick told Snotlout. "It's one thing to help mortals, but quite another to help the gods. Who knows, they may reward you."

This cheered up Snotlout. He hopped on Hookfang and made the motion to charge. His Nightmare set off an angry fireball and soared to the

sky. Astrid felt relieved to see him become part of the battle. Almost.

"Thor brought you here?" Fishlegs asked.

"Yes," the woman said, wooden hair standing on one edge. She walked to where Hiccup stood. Toothless growled at her, and Harmful shone orange in warning. "Light travels extremely fast, and light is made of lightning. It's also quite a thrilling ride. Where's Mud?"

"He's-" Astrid started, and her voice choked.

"Fury, this is important. You're my nephew. Let me heal your rider," the woman told the Night Fury. Toothless sniffed her, but he let her pass. Harmful stopped firing rainbow lights, lowered itself to her hand.

"Where is Muddy?"

"Alvin got him," Fishlegs said in barely a whisper. "They're down in the Underworld; there's a tunnel that leads to it. We would have followed, except the Changewings-"

The woman's face stretched with fear; Stoick's expression darkened. He had seen his son as well, swaying with his prosthetic against Toothless with unfocused, open eyes.

She held Hiccup in her arms; she traced her finger around the rune stone and patch of blood that had appeared on his shirt. Hiccup, without knowing, pressed against her and let his eyes close.

Stoick opened the shirt. The rune stone, having served its purpose crumbled into dust. The blood remained.

"We need to find them," Stoick said. "And get help for Hiccup. He's bleeding!"

"_I _will find them, and it's not Hiccup's blood," the woman retorted. "Astrid Hofferson? Is that you?"

"Um, yeah?" Astrid felt her neck hairs prickle.

"You've grown into a strong woman; your mother must be proud of you. Tell me, did Alvin hurt my son?"

"YOUR son?"

"Yes." The woman's eyes became narrow, and her tone became deadly. "Did Alvin. Hurt. My Son?"

"If you don't know, that's Eos, one angry fertility goddess," Loki piped up. "Best to answer honestly because she gives a mean slap."

Astrid couldn't bring herself to lie to a goddess. But she couldn't bring herself to give details, not to that worried, angry face. Her head dipped up and down to imitate a nod.

"That infernal-" the woman shuddered, and vines shot at the rocks,

piercing them. Fishlegs squeaked, and the invisible Vikings went quiet.

"Val." Stoick placed an arm on her shoulders to calm her. "I'm scared too. He won't get away with this."

"He won't." She looked murderous. "We need to go to the Underworld. But we need to know what we're up against."

"That's easy enough." Stoick went to the one Outcast whose face covering had been ripped off. The chief lifted the poor man with one hand. "Tell us what Alvin has been up to."

27. Chapter Twenty-Six

He didn't trust the boy. Not after Modi, despite being half-drowned and bound by ironwood, managed to talk to the lightning and refused to call it off. Alvin had put the boy through intense pain, pain that should have made him pass out, and the boy had remained conscious and resistant.

More audaciously, Modi had bitten him- that cheeky brat! Honestly, clap the same hand over a boy's mouth twice, and he didn't forgive you. It hadn't broken the skin, but Alvin's right hand felt numb where the sharp teeth had pierced him. The numbness warned him not to try that again, that something terrible would happen if he let the boy bite him further. He hadn't had time to ponder it, what with the sky cracking open with thunder. Modi had then relinquished control over them, just as the pain should have set his groin on fire.

Alvin had had to drag Modi into that barred tunnel- after Woedin had blasted through the "closed for renovation sign" and rubble- to avoid the lightning bolts hitting them. Lightning wasn't attracted to solid rock; Alvin knew that much from Outcast Island storms. Still, they had to walk away from the light.

At least Woedin hadn't had to blast more rock; the tunnel had been carved from solid rock. Torch braziers hung from the walls.

Modi was still shouting advice at Astrid, but Alvin had prepared. Those of the Archipelago knew that witches who could talk were dangerous. His mother had proven that too well. So, one arm around the boy's neck to choke his sound, another reaching to his belt for a knotted cloth, one inscribed with multiple reverse Fehu runes. In a minute he had gagged Modi, grabbed the glowing phone from the boy's waist, and forced him to stand on aching, shivering legs. He used the phone to call Heluth, to negotiate. Amazing how one's confidence broke easily with the right words and laughter.

Heluth deserved that scare for lying to them, and for making him swear not to mess with souls or minds. He had told her as such and let her hear Mud's muffled moans of pain before she talked to him. Her fear let him push down his own anxiety about being alone in Helheim. He had wanted to be here, but there was the sense that Modi had forced his hand.

I'm terrified. But I'm still going to stop you.

It would have been different without the lightning. Then he would

have had his army of Outcasts and Hysterics behind him, a glorious march to conquer death itself. Then, after letting Norbert kill himself trying to conquer Heluth, Alvin would rebuild the world in a treacherous image. As it stood, Alvin walked alone with only the rainbow crystal for light and with a stubborn hostage. The boy would pay for that.

Alvin shoved his fear into the recess of his mind, twisted it into suspicion. Capturing and draining Modi the first time had spoiled him; now, he couldn't drain the brat. Must have had something to do with that green glow that had entered him in that infernal ways. The ironwood bracelets had the same effect of restraining his powers, however, so he couldn't use Vanir tricks. He couldn't talk his way out of this.

Yet suspicion plagued Alvin. If he hadn't taken that vow to not read minds- no matter how hard he pressed his hand against the boy's forehead it yielded no knowledge- then he could have confirmed that suspicion.

He could have carried the boy, but it was far more agonizing for Modi to walk under Woedin's watchful eye. Far more unable to think. Any sign of trickery, and his dragon would know. Woedin was smart, mistrustful. Good qualities in a dragon.

Modi walked, wincing as his thighs rubbed together. The manacles covered most of his upper arm like metal gloves. He swallowed against the knotted gag that Alvin had replaced. His bare feet, callused from weeks of walking without shoes, barely made a sound against the earthen floor.

"Odd choice of drink," Alvin spoke. That's when he realized how nervous he was, large hand clamped against the soft, damp vest. "Three parts cider is rather strong for a useless runt."

Despite being unable to talk, Modi still communicated with his angry eyes and by miming with his bound hands. He indicated that he wanted to drink till he passed out. His face didn't turn red, meaning he told the truth. Which made sense, given the pain shooting through his lower half.

"I doubt you're going to be allowed that much, if Lu is so interested in keeping you alive. Quite a burden, to be attached to loved ones."

Modi's breath left his nose. The anger in his eyes faltered. Alvin could feel his small frame shaking.

"I knew your mother when she was alive," he went on, "I sent her to Lava Lout Island to die, when she got suspicious of me. It was a miracle the volcano vapors didn't kill her immediately, or the child she was carrying."

The boy's eyes widened. His shaking intensified, threatening to turn into thrashing. Alvin kept his grip steady.

"I had to kill her, with her charging on me like an overweight Berserker. The Lava Louts hated me for killing her baby as well, and they buried him separately, as if he deserved the honor. Four more months and Stoick would have had another embarrassment to worry

about."

Shut up! Modi's eyes screamed at him. He thrashed like a wild animal, but Alvin wouldn't let go. Nor would he let go of this delicious realization.

"What an existence, to seek death and not be able to stay in the Underworld," he whispered. "When death surrounded you from birth. You shouldn't be alive, and you got brought back Odin's command, to live as an outcast in Asgard. All because of one well-placed stab to a crazy woman's heart. What a piteous destiny."

The eyes became downright murderous and terrified. Any scheme that Modi had been planning went out the door with his thrashing and panicking. Alvin took the opportunity to put the pieces together.

"You don't know how Hiccup betrayed Berk to help me learn to train dragons. If it weren't for that boy, your _real_ brother, your uncle the great dragon would still be alive. And I would never have learned about you or the gods."

Modi shook his head in disbelief, still panicking.

Woedin hissed in warning. The skeleton sentries appeared: a quartet of walking bones with cracked Viking armor and twisted spears. Their leader, who had a peacock feather hanging from his helmet, lifted a torch. The braziers all lit up. An orange hue tinted the rocky tunnel, illuminated the wooden boards and skeletons above them that held the structure together.

Modi quieted down, stopped thrashing. His eyes remained fearful but calmer.

"Ah. Heluth sent you. Hurt me, you hurt him." Alvin pushed him forward, keeping a grip on his right shoulder. "Take us to her."

They nodded, beckoned him forward with long spears. Modi walked more gingerly; the eyeless sockets followed his movement. They pointed to two vibrating doors in the distance decorated with red fur.

Alvin ignored his anxiety; soon these undead men would serve him. Then he would show Heluth how to conduct Ragnorak properly.

* * *

><p>Vali and Vidar fought the hardest battle of their lives, and the direct combat had not even started. They had thought that standing behind the few cliffs that remained and chucking rocks would at least slow down the invaders. Chucking rocks was child's play for sons of Odin, and they even made a game of how many times the boulders skipped after tearing holes in the fleets.<p>

The ships made gurgling, protesting sounds as they sank; men jumped overboard in frustrated panic. Then the Changewing army had flown with their riders directly to the mountain.

Vali had attempted to take one down with a rock, but its rider had spotted the demigod with his beard and dirty hands and rolled out of

the way in time. Vidar had yanked Vali into hiding ten seconds too late.

"We've got company!" he had shouted to the leader, who rode a Whispering Death.

"Split up and deal with them!" the leader had shouted, placing his goggles on. "Go invisible and take them alive!"

Vidar had uttered a curse as three of the dragons had disappeared with their riders. He looked helplessly as the remaining army shot into the mountain, away from them.

Modi was right. We've given these mortals the world on a silver platter.

Vali took his axe in one hand and a boulder in another. "We're not going down without a fight."

He tossed the boulder and his axe. The axe survived the spray of green acid that materialized; the boulder didn't. Vali's axe returned to his hand, and he tossed again. Laughter echoed around them as the ground shook further from Heimdall's horn. They heard wet footsteps clomp onto shore as the Outcasts and Hysterics swam from their sunken ships and uttered battle cries.

"Right," Vidar muttered to himself, "The snares should hold them until we deal with the dragons; the dragons are the real problem. This is another hunting trip. We're hunting dragons who are extremely smart and can turn invisible." He put down his boulder and gathered dust in his hand. "We need to mark them."

Vali understood. He crushed a boulder to fine powder with one hand and pressed it to his axe blade. Then he tossed it again, with a handful of power, and the dust sprinkled in the air. An outline of a dragon and a coughing rider appeared.

"Get him!" Vali shouted. "Get all of them!"

Vidar winced as the axe sunk into the dragon's neck, spurting blood. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to toss more dust to mark their opponent, and the axe whacked the dragon so that its blood also filled the sky for marking. The Changewings tried their best to dodge and spray acid, their riders striking at the axe with their own arms, but Helheim hath no fury like a Vanir weapon. Vali's axe was said to take his owner's violent temperament, and Vidar had always believed it.

His snares caught unsuspecting victims, slinging them up with curses. Countless Outcasts and Hysterics fell into his pits. Even so, he saw others, including the bearded one who had to be their crazy leader, skirt the traps.

"Find these demigods!" the crazy leader boomed to his followers. "They must be captured alive!"

Vali clenched a rock. "I'd like to see you try, Dirty-beard."

Vidar, hidden behind a crumbling piece of rock, turned to the sky. "Odin, great All-Father; we sense that your magic is being restored

to you, and to this barren soil. We have no great powers, and we need your wisdom. Help us, Father."

The sky responded with lightning, lots of lightning, and a burst of sunlight. The brothers shielded their eyes and heard the cries of alarm. When they looked up, they saw Thor swirling a thunderstorm, watching the armies with intent, grief restrained on his noble face. The mortals, recognizing the Almighty Son of Odin, realized what line they had crossed. Most turned and tried to retreat;

Three bolts each struck the Changewings and their riders, sending them plummeting on top of the panicking armies. Thor brought himself lower, inviting attack, but none dared strike. He took the opportunity to strike the armies directly, letting Mjollnir's power dance from metal to metal. It was like watching an electric ballet.

Vali and Vidar cheered, Vidar clapping his hands. Father had answered their prayers with vigor. Thor was going to help them! They took up their arms and joined battle with renewed vigor.

* * *

><p>Ender Wiggin had it easy, Mud thought bitterly. _He never got captured by his opponents because the aliens were too many light-years away. The only physical enemies were trying to kill him, or teach him a lesson. They never captured him to extend the agony._

Then again, Ender Wiggin had borne the blessing of morally ambiguous opponents and Valentine. Alvin had little ambiguity, and Heluth wasn't Valentine Wiggin however hard she tried. She didn't have the sweet temperament.

Mud had thought all he needed was a few minutes in the soothing dark tunnels; the Green Death's soul had filled his brain with the right memories to make him understand why the "gift" was valuable. So had biting Alvin, even though he had done it to keep telling the lightning what to do. It had surged energy into him, a strange confidence. He could do this.

Then Alvin had unpeeled his fear, this irrational fear of Alvin himself, and his concentration had fled. He was just a scared, freckled boy in manacles, barely disobeying the command to call off lightning.

The reason he was able to disobey? Alvin hadn't removed Mud's original ironwood cuffs, the ones fashioned by charitable dwarves when he had worked for a month in their smithy. The large cuffs slipped over them, and the originals had expanded in response, protecting him from blind slavery.

Calm down, child, The Green Death's soul had whispered to him. _He can't hurt you worse than he has._

That's very reassuring, Mud had shot back. _You're the reason I'm in this kerfuffle._

He doesn't know. Concentrate.

By the gods, why did he need a Freudian backstory? Couldn't being captured underground and drained, not to mention controlled, be enough reason for fearing one mortal? Did he need an irrational phobia rooted in negative association?

None of the skeletons had a Sorting Hat or a Time Turner, and he didn't expect them to; they didn't know the story of Harry Potter, and Mud couldn't exactly reach out and beg a ragged wizard's hat for a sword. The Whispering Death knew what he was, for starters and it watched him.

Honestly, he wanted to tell it, _killing you wasn't personal. If things were different, maybe we could have even been friends._

The Whispering Death read his expression and shot one back: _No, we wouldn't have. _

One went closer to open the double doors; Alvin shoved Mud forward. So he got a chance to duck as the loud rock music blasted through. Even so, Amanda's Palmers rough lyrics made his ears ring.

My friend has problems with winter and autumn

They give him prescriptions; they shine bright lights on him

They say it's genetic, they say he can't help it

They say you can catch it but sometimes you're born with it

Oh for Thor's sake! He straightened up just as Alvin recovered. It was good that he was gagged, or he would have screamed, "Amanda Palmer?! Here I am trying to get my mind focused and your Special Project has Amanda f-ing Palmer on maximum volume?! You're supposed to be helping me!" As it were, only angry, indignant grunts came out.

Alvin had the large hand pressed to his shoulder, but Woedin had gotten the full blast and collapsed to the ground. Dragons hated noise; that was the good thing. The bad thing was that the sound had knocked out the Green Death's soul. It couldn't handle alternative rock.

Mud was on his own.

This was Lu's Special Project, named END OF THE WORLD. Bright lights flashed from the ceiling in tandem as glamour of Amanda Palmer singing with the Dresden Dolls on a black stage, ignoring the harsh lights and clapping from the skeletons and demons. Several black-haired girls, all identical to Lu, stood in the crowd of skeletons cheering. A bartender wiped a polished counter with white silk.

_Mum is going to _kill _her. _

Alvin stopped, completely perplexed. One thing about Vikings, they can't handle elements from outside their own time. They especially could not handle useless entertainment, hence why remembering _The Princess Bride_ had worked for the mind invasion. This was Mud's cue, but he couldn't summon the concentration with the loud music and screaming crowd. At least the Whispering Death was down.

"Heluth!" Alvin roared. "Show yourself, or I cut his throat!"

"No need for that." The bartender came out from behind the counter, looking bored and worried. "I'm always here."

Lu hadn't bothered to cover her dead side, pure white bone from head to toe. The other half was covered head to toe in black. She wore a black sparkly tank top, a black miniskirt and pink tights. Her only ancient quality was the boots, and even they had an inch of heel.

Mud's heart filled with love, fear and admiration. He knew Heluth's dead side was on her right side, not her left. She wasn't giving in without a fight.

Alvin pressed his fingers tighter into Mud's collarbone. "If you're Heluth, turn down the music."

"What?"

"Turn it down; I can't think with it on!"

Lu looked at Mud; he pleaded with his eyes. _Help me, Lu. I need to calm down. _

"Amanda, switch to Maurice Sendak, _Really Rosie_, " she said. "Keep it soft."

Amanda Palmer's glamour obeyed; the crowd moaned and downed their pink, foamy drinks. They also went quiet, though the skeletons pointed middle bones in the air. She and her drummer started playing a more soothing tone, in a softer voice:

There was once a boy named Pierre

Who only would say, "I don't care!"

Read his story, my friend, for you'll find

At the end that a suitable

Moral lies there

Mud's heart rate began to lower. The singsong tune allowed him to calm down, to replace his irrational fear with a more solid one.

"I know exactly what you're going to do," she said, nodding at Mud's bonds. "I bet there's an ironwood bracelet with my name on it hanging from your belt."

"It won't be enough," Alvin said, fully agitated now. "I want you to swear on the Loki tree to play no tricks. To swear to always tell the truth. And to swear that you will never betray me."

One day his mother said

When Pierre climbed out of bed

"Good morning, darling boy, you are my only joy"

Pierre said, "I don't care!"

Lu gave him a dead-eyed look, even more impressive when missing one eye. Her long hair fluttered behind her like a wedding veil. Amanda kept singing; so did her drummer.

"What would you like to eat?"

"I don't care!"

"Some lovely cream of wheat?"

"I don't care!"

"Don't sit backwards on your chair"

"I don't care!"

"Or pour syrup on your hair"

"I don't care!"

"You keep forgetting who my dad is; I'm destined to betray and play tricks on mortals."

Mud winced as his muscles threatened to cramp. Amanda's croon dropped to an unintelligible hum.

"But I can make an exception!" Lu said hurriedly, seeing the pain across Mud's face. "No need for violence."

The cramping stopped. Mud remained calm. He just had to find the right place to aim.

Alvin laughed. "You 'make exceptions'. How amusing that a death goddess is brought to her knees with one simple threat." He beckoned her to come closer with his sword.

"Hold it." Her bored tone returned. "What I meant to say is that before I swear anything, you need to know exactly what you're getting into. You want an army of the undead? You got it."

Alvin's brow furrowed in confusion. Lu nodded at a door beside the bar counter. An old man in a white collared shirt and black jeans came out with a stack of parchment papers. Alvin's jaw dropped.

"Mildew? Is that you?"

"As a dead, clever Viking who once knew you, I have to inform you of what may happen when binding a daughter of Loki," Mildew spoke in an emotionless tone as he placed the papers on the bar counter. "I assume that you will believe me."

Thank you, Lu! Mud could have wept with relief. This was the distraction that he needed. His eyes closed, and he began to concentrate.

"First, when you raise the undead, you raise every soul that has not

died in combat." Mildew nodded. He still had his long beard, but without the helmet he almost looked bald. The jeans covered his bony legs, giving him the appearance of healthy muscles. "That includes souls that you have murdered, Alvin."

"Mildew, this isn't like you." Alvin sounded suspicious, panicky. "You're supposed to be bitter and clever! Not a puppet!"

"Your mother, Alvin." Mildew spoke with curbed reproach. "She still wants to crown you King of the Wilderwest. If brought back, she'll do what she can to exercise-" Emotion battled his resentment. "To exercise control as matriarch."

Mud recalled nights spent singing to Nephil under a full moon, telling the dragon that one day they'd both grow big. He remembered the first time Ivor had brought him to Rainbow Isle, had isolated him to watch him change.

"Mildew, you helped trick Stoick's boy into training dragons for us!" Alvin shouted, no longer focused on Mud or Heluth. His hand loosened, or he would have felt the fur vest turning into black scale. "You were one of my valued friends!"

"Also the people you-" Clarity broke across Mildew's aged face. "Alvin, what are you doing here?"

"Never mind that; it's another of the death goddess's tricks-"

"You shouldn't fear the death goddess playing tricks-" Mildew started, but by then Mud had changed completely. Alvin found himself with a Night Fury in his grasp, a Night Fury who latched onto his arm and wrapped his tail around the man's other arm. Retractable teeth shot out and cut through the metal armor, biting the skin. White energy flowed from man to dragon. The knotted cloth fell to the floor in shreds.

Amanda Palmer kept playing. Her brash voice became louder, narrating about a talking lion and Pierre.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"I don't care!"

"Then I'll eat you, if I may"

"I don't care!"

"So the lion ate Pierre"

"You- shouldn't-be-doing-this!" Alvin choked from above Mud's ear. "Not-possible!"

"Funny," Mud couldn't help but think. _"Astrid agreed with you once."_

The Green Death had been right; as long as Alvin had Mud's essence, then he would always have control. But Mud was the Green Death's kin, and so knew how to drain a mortal. It was in his blood.

28. Chapter Twenty-Seven

Snotlout spun with Hookfang through the clouds. He would have arrived sooner, if not for having to dodge the bolts of lightning that Thor had summoned as well as the rubble from the cracking mountain.

Amazing what plant goddesses like the chief's wife could do. She had told him to call her "Eos" and injected some green substance into Hookfang's leg. The Nightmare had reared up immediately and scampered, eager to join battle. Only Eos's calm words had stopped Hookfang from burning the woods down.

The lightning roared around them. He had never been so glad to not be Hiccup; if HOOKFANG had metal wrapped around his tail, they would be the ones going down in flames.

Great gods, he hadn't asked where Mud was. He only realized this now as he got the idea to ride one of the thunderbolts, the way they had ridden to get here.

"Thor!" he shouted as he broke through the cloud cover. Panicky yells and thunder met his ears. Hookfang reared but did not alight himself as the lightning bolt crashed into several manholes. They hovered in the air, watching the scene.

The great Almighty looked up. Lightning danced from Mjollnir, obviously enjoying the dance through metal body after metal body of Outcast. Vali and Vidar were dueling Norbert the Nutjob, who had shrugged off the bolts somehow- perhaps he had trained with trigger-happy Berserkers- and fended them off with his battle-axe.

"Son of Spitelout, you need to help my brothers," Thor said, gesturing to the duel. "They do not know how to catch and release lightning, so I cannot send Mjollnir's power there, and they are losing."

Hookfang growled in disgust. Snotlout felt like doing the same.

"Let me get this straight," he said, "and you're probably going to shoot me with lightning for saying this, but they attacked my dragon. And they tried to break their way into our Dragon Academy just to scare Mud- the son that you didn't defend as a baby. And you want me to help THEM?"

This was the stupidest thing Snotlout had done, and that was saying a lot. He braced himself for the electric currents that would come.

Thor, however, lowered his hammer. The lightning swirled around them like a protective shield.

"That is a fair point," he said. "My brothers did not acquit themselves to deserve a rescue. Nor do I deserve to ask you for help when I haven't even helped my children. You are a brave youth for speaking honestly."

Snotlout couldn't help but beam. Hookfang stopped growling.

"Nevertheless, I will reward you for stepping in to stop the duel," Thor said. He came closer and patted Hookfang on the nose. "To use the common slang, they have gotten in over their heads. Bravery must always be commended. Go forward, and the lightning will not hurt you. Do your father's name proud."

"Consider it done!" Snotlout urged Hookfang forward; they charged over the streams of electricity.

Norbert had obviously received Mud's stolen essence or a serious power upgrade; he held off the two Vanir easily with his double-headed axe in one hand and a sword in another. Vali fought with his own axe, half a size smaller than Norbert's, and Vidar used a small sword. They circled around each other; the lightning avoided them.

"You whelps annoy me!" The sword struck at Vidar's forehead. Vidar turned so that the blade did not slice into his brain, but a shallow cut bloomed. He stumbled back, recovered with his own sword when Norbert's blade attacked the same spot. He just blocked the blow and jumped to the side.

Vali had a worse time of it; no matter where he struck, Norbert's larger axe would block his blade. Perhaps it too has been dipped in Vanir essence, so that the gold gleamed impossibly under the dense clouds. Apparently being a Nutjob meant that you could perform offense and defense at the same time. Vali's swings became more furious, but he didn't land a single blow. Not even a decent poke to the stomach, only swift screeches of Vanir steel.

They swerved around the manholes filled with screaming Vikings and snares with limp bodies. The netted Vikings hung in the air upside, brandishing weapons like Terrible Terrors caught in silvery traps. There wasn't a lot of room to fight, what with the collapsing mountains leaving no high ground.

Some of the bodies weren't so limp, and stubborn hands tugged at the youth's hair, distracting them. Vali tore away while Vidar tapped them with his sword's hilt. Norbert took the time to hit them both with the blunt ends of his weapons. They fell against the bound Outcasts and Hysterics, who held them. Probably they would have tugged away if not for the crazy, armed Viking coming towards them.

"Tell me who you both are, so Norbert can make his formal boast!" The Hysteric chief shouted.

"Over our dead bodies," Vali spat at him.

"So be it!" Norbert raised the axe, taking his time in case the demigods changed their minds. That's when Hookfang's blast caught him in the arm, knocking the weapon out of his hand.

"Why don't you pick on a dragon your own size?" Snotlout called, charging in. More fire at the ground, and the Outcasts and Hysterics let go of the demigods. They proceeded to run towards Hookfang and swing onto him. Hookfang attempted to light Vali on fire, but the demigod merely swatted the flames with his bare hands.

"Do that again and I'll hack your head off, dragon."

"Thank you," Vidar said. "You ride your beast well."

"Thank me once that nut job's down for good." Snotlout urged Hookfang to annihilate, which the dragon did. The fire didn't hurt Norbert, showing just how much essence he had imbibed, but the force knocked him back.

"We need these in Asgard," Vali said with undisguised envy. "I suppose we owe you one."

"Get out of the way!" Thor shouted. Snotlout urged Hookfang to fly higher. As they did, the lightning streaked toward Norbert and the others, electrocuting them. Hookfang shot more fire, and the combined energy of fire and lightning forced them to retreat.

"YOU WON'T HEAR THE LAST OF NORBERT THE NUTJOB!" The Hysteric shouted, on his knees. "WE WILL FIND YOUR NAMES AND RIP YOU TO RIBBONS--"

Thor sent one last current, knocking the Hysteric out cold. Snotlout cheered, even as Vali and Vidar sat and watched the large, bearded chief go down.

"Now THAT is impressive lightning!" he said. "Wait till my dad hears about this!"

* * *

><p>Ardis stomped her front blue foot. LEFT BEHIND! NOT ALLOWED TO HELP! LIKE WE'RE CHILDREN!<p>

WE **ARE** CHILDREN, Gunhild reminded her. AT LEAST, WE'RE FLEDGLINGS.

STILL, Einar grumbled, MUD IS FAMILY. EVERY TIME WE'RE WITHOUT HIM, HE GETS IN TROUBLE.

HICCUP IS HIS FAMILY TOO, AND OURS, Helgi said, without confidence. PERHAPS HE WILL KEEP MUD SAFE. HE AND FURY.

The babies were prowling the remains of the Bifrost, waiting for the party to return. They dared not go near the spot with Magni's body, or the body of the man that they had killed. They had wanted to come, but Aunt Oyster had told them "out of the question."

WE CAN HELP! Einar had insisted. WE'RE NIGHT FURIES! WE NEVER MISS.

"You can help best by guarding the village," Eos had told the red dragon firmly. "I know you're all eager to save my son, but I haven't seen your mother in years, and I don't want to have to deliver a message that her other children are dead."

She didn't say it, but the babies knew:_ we can't look out for you if you get in trouble._

The Bifrost had started to crumble as the sun dripped into the ocean with gleaming, orange rays. Crystals collapsed into rainbow showers,

littering the cliff with shattered quartz. The babies watched the crystals fall with concern.

OUR MOTHER, Gunhild said, placing her tail against the Bifrost. SHE'S HURT.

WE HAVE TO HELP HER! Einar cried.

HOW? Ardis asked with exasperation. WE WERE TOLD TO STAY AND GUARD THE VILLAGE. BESIDES, WE CAN'T SEND OURSELVES TO ASGARD; THE JOURNEY WOULD KILL US!

It is a shame that baby dragons are obedient when families are concerned. Gunhild, however, had an idea.

WE ARE NIGHT FURIES, she said. THAT MEANS OUR SALIVA CAN HEAL.

She began licking a red crystal that was broken at the end.

ARE YOU DAFT? Ardis asked her. IT'S A CRYSTAL, NOT A LIVING-

Shards came together as Gunhild licked. The crystal assembled itself slowly, patiently. Her siblings' jaws dropped as it then flew to the Bifrost and found a niche to stick into.

WELL, WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? She cried, grabbing another crystal to lick. HELP ME!

Baldr came from where he paced the village impatiently. He too watched in astonishment as the dragons licked the crystals till their tongues were sandpaper-dry, and then started to bring buckets of water. Gunhild would gargle large gulps and resume her licking, working fervently.

Every crystal found its place. By the time night had draped Berk, the Bifrost gleamed like an amusement park attraction.

* * *

><p>Hiccup saw everything and heard nothing. Centuries washed through him, as did surprised memories. Memories of rocks eroding, falling into the deep ocean currents; of boots stomping through soft soil and scattering it over wooden floors. Bits of him were strewn through the magic that passed through his thoughts.<p>

He remembered cliffs where only dragon paws tromped, of large, regal creatures that ruled over others. He remembered when the grasses died on those cliffs, when Odin's staff had cut into the soil. He remembered fire and blood spilled on clean rocks.

_Dirt doesn't move. _This is what his conscious mind thought. But currents of soil swept through his conscious mind, filling it. Dirt had history, it had layers. It had FIRE, golden fire burning underground. The currents wanted to carry him with them, deeper into the ground, and teach him more about the heat.

"Not this time," a girl said, and he felt himself SHOVED into something more solid, something pink, speckled and squishy. When he tried to move, he found the pinky and squishy form moved with it. A thick liquid splattered over the front, cold and sticky.

It was his _body. _His hands moved involuntarily; someone grabbed him.

Gods, I'm dying. No, I nearly died. Someone pushed me back.

The earth didn't want to let go of him, and it clung to the edges of his skin. It told him of a great destiny associated with the rocks of the Archipelago. It told him of the great things he could do, if only he let the earth into his mind.

_I can't fulfill a destiny if I'm under the ground. Thanks, but no thanks. _

He opened his mouth, found air coming in. The liquid battled the soil currents, wrestling with the edges.

"Hiccup." A soft voice, one he didn't recognize. A tree stroking his hair.

"Hiccup!" This was Astrid, sounding panicked.

He blinked. The open sunlight peeked down at him, bursting through the cloud cover. He noted the rubble, the sedated dragons, the twins' scorched armor, Astrid's worry. His . . . his dad? And Loki? If his dad was there, interrogating that Outcast with ripped armor, then who was holding him? Not Toothless, because Toothless was nuzzling him.

"Don't move." The soft voice again. Then an ambush of kisses, a tight hug. He gasped. "I thought I had lost you. How did you know?"

"The rune stone." Hiccup made a gesture, only to find rock crumbling down his stone. "It was made for a great dragon, and dragon's blood-Ivor's blood- attached it to me. Ivor gave it to me for a reason. I knew it would hold." His eyes lit up. "It worked! I need to tell Mud his rune stone worked!"

The hands holding him went stiff, and he realized that a tree was hugging them or something with smooth tree branches and a . . . voluminous trunk.

"We can tell him when we've rescued him," the tree woman said.

"Am I dead? Are you a spirit?"

"No and no. But you nearly were." More worry, anxiety. "Hiccup, why couldn't you have waited? The rune stone wasn't enough; Ivor didn't give you that much blood. You almost died!"

"How do you know my . . ." Hiccup looked up at the woman and gulped. It was like one of Stoick's carvings had come to life. "_Mom?"

She smiled, although her hug felt more like a throttle, and her smile was strained. She was holding Harmful, and that's when he knew. The earth's hold on him was gone, but the earth's memories weren't. They warned him.

"We have to find Mud," he said. "There isn't much time."

* * *

><p>If losing part of himself had been extremely painful for Mud, regaining it was the opposite. Though he hated the sight and taste of blood, he held onto Alvin's arm. The essence flowed back to him quickly, knowing its proper place.<p>

The Green Death had been right. He hadn't been all right over the past few days, having lost bits of himself.

His stomach went queasy. He lost his tail grip on Alvin's other arm. It proceeded to twist and press the sensitive spot under his chin. Mud immediately let go and dropped to the polished ground, feeling drowsy pleasure and nausea overwhelm him. Already his concentration was ebbing, but he managed to use his wings to leap away. The ironwood manacles still bound his front legs together, cutting into the dragon skin.

"Get away from him!" Heluth cried. "Dolly, help him!"

Mud changed back, back as a queasy small boy with Alvin thundering towards him. He found himself leaping out of the way. A burly man in a black hood came forward with a spear, knocking Alvin to the ground. That must have been the bouncer, because as Mildew ran forward to help Alvin, the burly man grabbed Mildew by the beard and tossed him back through the open door.

"Here!" Mud held out his bound hands. The bouncer brought the spear down on the connecting chain, separating the manacles. Mud couldn't use Vanir spells, but at least he could use his hands now. Maybe to steal the key for these cuffs from Alvin.

"Give it up, Alvin." Heluth's voice was no longer bored. More skeletons appeared, surrounding him. "Your dragon's down and you're mortal again. You've proven that you're not stupid."

"You're right," Alvin said, right arm bleeding and useless. "I'm not stupid."

He used his left hand to bring out Heimdall's horn. Mud cried out in warning. The skeletons charged, but he already blew. The sound made them shatter into dust. Their helmets and cracked armor clanged to the ground. The crowd screamed and fled. More skeletons replaced them.

"Why don't I make this simple for you, _Lu_," Alvin said, holding out the horn in warning. "I can destroy each and every dead or undead thing you throw at me. I can even destroy this little pub of yours without blinking. I may not have hold over Modi anymore, but I have hold over you, since you are half-dead. You obviously care about the inhabitants here, giving them music and free drinks."

"You want me to pledge loyalty in exchange for NOT destroying The End of the World and every dead being here," Heluth translated. "Dude, that is _low_."

"I'm a Treacherous." He managed a grin at her. "What were you expecting?"

She started to walk forward. Mud made to grab at her, to tell her not

to do it, but the bouncer dragged him back. Vibrations coursed through the rock floor, familiar ones.

"I certainly didn't expect you to summon my foster mother from the dead, after you killed her on Midgard," she said in a deadly voice, "or that you'd torture my foster brother just because she brutally slaughtered that old man traitor, and to get to me. Who does that?" She turned to the crowd. "What kind of creep torments a dead woman's soul AFTER having ruined her life?"

"A creep!" The crowd shouted back in response. "A malicious creep!"

"A Neil Gaiman character adapted for the screen," Amanda Palmer called from the stage. Her drummer gave an appropriate percussion accompaniment. Some laughed, though more shouted angrily.

Alvin acted as if the words were rubber chips pelted at him. He held his right arm at an odd angle but managed to use it to get the ironwood bracelet with "Fehu" carved on it. The vibrations intensified.

"But one thing you have to know." Heluth was now in front of the crowd, two feet away from Alvin. She extended her right arm with her fist clenched. "You blow that horn, you WILL blast me first. Then there will be no one to keep the spirits in charge. Even with Heimdall's horn, it won't affect every spirit. Some will dodge it; find a way to wrestle it out of your hands. Even if they pledge loyalty, some will find ways to undermine your rule. Like your mother."

Alvin seemed to sense that he was losing control of the situation. The crowd turned to him, skeletons and demons and Heluth clones. Yet Heluth held her arm out, as if it were a tempting fish for a dragon.

"Do you understand the situation?" Heluth asked sweetly.

He responded by snapping the bracelet around her right wrist.

"Lu!" Mud cried, and the bouncer held him back. Something about his grip felt familiar.

"Not yet," the bouncer whispered. "Lu isn't down."

"_Heimdall_?" Mud whispered.

"I think I do." Alvin smirked. "Now swear by the Loki tree-"

Heluth's image wavered; there were cries of surprise from the crowd. Her right hand became skeletal, and her left hand became flesh. The left hand reached out and snatched the horn from Alvin while he was distracted. An ancient brogue tainted her voice, one identical to Mud's.

"Oy, you really are a barmy man. Ironwood doesn't affect dead Vanir bone." Heluth backed away with her live and dead halves reverted. She plucked the bracelet from her skeletal hand and dropped it as if it were a cockroach. She crushed it under one well-placed heel.

"Lu." Mud stared in astonished. "You gave up your punk glamour?
Why?"

"To save you, and to get the bloody horn," she responded with a heavy accent. "If he had blown on it, the whole place would have come down. I couldn't help you if bound to this bloke, but now I sound like a bloody limey again."

"You did that for me?" he asked, surprised to find tears dotting his eyes. Lu LOVED being punk, having a foreign accent. That's why he had asked the Norns for information on teenage rebellion, as a reward for being a good student. And he had been so ANGRY to find Lu changed into an American punk, just before Odin told him to go to Rainbow Isle-

Alvin gave a cry of frustration, ready to tackle Heluth to the ground. Before he could, several vines burst from the walls and snagged him by the ankle. Dandelions dangled along the vine, spreading pollen on the floor.

The double doors burst open. A harsh, familiar voice came from the tunnel.

_"I warned you not to hurt my son." _

"Mum?" Heluth and Mud said at the same time, both equally astonished. Her punk glamour had completely vanished, because she hadn't said "Mum" in a long time.

For the first time, Alvin's face revealed his fear. Then the vines bound his legs together and started smashing him against the walls.

29. Chapter Twenty-Eight

Heimdall's hand came over Mud's eyes. Normally Mud didn't like having someone else blind him, but the sound of Alvin's bones crunching made him stand still and attempt to close his ears. At some point Alvin was screaming in agony, and his words became garbled with the screaming.

"Don't pity him," Loki said from Mud's left. "He should have known better than to disregard a Vanir oath, even if said Vanir was once a dragon. When a god takes an oath, they have to follow it to the letter."

Mud didn't like the Outcast, hated and feared him, but the smallest grain of sickening pity kept his eyes closed. His bottom half ached with pain as Heimdall held him. He heard the screams break off like the dying notes in a funeral march and finally stop. There was the rough sound of cloth falling over a limp form. The sound of someone rummaging through thick pockets.

Someone grasped his hand, fitted a small key into the binding manacle. It clattered to the ground, along with the other manacle. Mud gasped as the skin from his wrists to elbows stung. He pulled off the ironwood cuffs and held them so his arms could breathe.

"His soul will probably appear in the river." Heluth sounded satisfied. "Eternal punishment is going to be fun."

Heimdall removed his hand. Mud blinked his eyes against the sudden reappearance of light. Where Alvin had stood, several black tablecloths covered a twitching bulge. A shudder exited his mouth as he saw the long vines snaking out from under the cloths; dandelions should not have thorns as thick as castle spikes. There was his mother, brown from head to toe, walking towards him and Heimdall. Before he knew it, long wooden arms were sweeping him up, along with Lu.

"Mum- you're alive!" He managed. His arms were bright red from Alvin's manacles, and they hung limply.

"Mum- you've become a dryad!" Lu gasped. "And very strong!"

"Lu, you're actually right," Mud said, several feet off the ground. "Dryad is a forest spirit. But how did you escape, Mum?"

"Fenris and Loki," Mum said; her eyes had never looked calmer, and yet Mud was scared. He had never seen her kill someone, though maybe it was because everyone in the Underworld was dead. "Apparently Loki wanted me alive before I came to save you. He wanted me to do the dirty work."

"Actually, no, darling," Loki said. "I just wanted to help you fulfill your vow, since Alvin hurt Mud before he tried to hurt my little girl."

"Daddy," Lu said with exasperation, "I haven't been a little girl for years. I'm a bloody teenager."

"That doesn't matter; I'll always be taller than you."

Mud took a deep breath. "Uncle Loki, how did you know about the World Tree sapling?"

"I'm the trickster god; I know everything," Loki said. He opened his arms as well and picked up the three of them. For a thin Vanir, he had impressive strength. "You're such a clever girl, Lu."

"I know," she said with a smirk. Then her expression changed. "Give it back, Daddy."

He broke away from the hug. Eos dropped Mud and Lu on the ground. Loki looked guilty.

"Give what, baby?"

"The horn." She held out her bare hands. "Daddy, I know when you're pickpocketing. Let Heimdall blow it once everyone here evacuates. I'm ready."

"What?" Mud looked at her. "Lu, you can't mean that! It tore the mountain open when Alvin used it last; if that happens here-"

"It has to happen, Momo." Lu sounded calm and dignified. "You have mortal and dragon blood, so you have free will, but I don't. I'm supposed to die when the Underworld's entrances are torn open, after

the horn was blown for the first time. That's my destiny."

"But-" Comprehension entered Mud's eyes: Lu wanting to have him close by on Dragon Island and telling him to restore the Green Death's magic, saying HE had to do it, sending Jo to help him and accidentally fulfilling the giant snake's destiny.

Gods, she had thought her time was up. Lu had thought she was going to _die_.

"But Lu," he choked, "Vidar didn't kill Fenris. And Fenris didn't kill Odin. You didn't bargain about Baldr. Ragnorak hasn't happened properly."

"That's because Vidar and Vali had a bloody change of heart and decided to help you," Lu said. "Baldr's too baby-faced, and fate is unraveling, though my fate hasn't. If I don't fulfill it, fate may never stitch it back together. The horn, Daddy."

"I'm sorry, Lulu, but I can't let you commit suicide in a grandiose way." Loki looked serious for the first time. "You're my daughter, Lu, and I'm not having you fulfill destiny the way Jormagund did."

"Why did I have to be your favorite child?" Lu complained. "You didn't shed tears when Jo died, not the way I did. It has to happen, Daddy."

"I didn't shed tears because it wasn't a good time to cry the way Thor was crying." Loki clenched his fist around the horn. "I did my best to stop him, but I couldn't, Lu. He made a choice. You don't have to make the same one!"

"Listen to the rumblings." Lu indicated with her heels. "It's going to come apart anyways; if it isn't now, it'll be in a few months. Every part of the mountain will come down on my realm, caving it in. Then the whole Underworld will be in shambles if I give myself more time. I'm half-dead already, and I can still be queen."

The crowd was nodding with acknowledge. An usher had already started the evacuation procedure, marching them out.

"My vines are holding the mountain together," Mum insisted, surprisingly calm despite this revelation. "Lu, you don't have to sacrifice yourself."

"I have to. I can feel it in my bones, living and dead."

Mud couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Lu, let Loki have the horn. I can't lose you after I've lost Nephil, Heimdall and Jo. I need you!"

"You didn't lose me," Heimdall grunted. "Let's just say that I've changed positions."

"You don't need me, Momo." Lu looked sad and regretful. "You haven't needed me for months. But the mortals and dragons need you. Don't look like that; it's a good thing. I need you more, to know that you're alive and out there still living on Midgard. And I'll always be here in the Underworld, just not alive."

"I know the Norns; I can talk to them-"

"_No_. Change my fate and they'll make you a slave for one thousand years even if they like you. I'll never speak to you if you do that."

Mud clammed up. His lower half started to ache and shiver again. Mum held him tight.

Loki shook his head. "No, Lulu. I'd rather have you half-alive than several thousand souls with their eternal salvation and punishments severed from them. Besides-"

"_Daddy_," her tone became threatening, "I know you mean well. But I've served my purpose. I kept Momo alive until he found enough people to care for him. Now will you give me the horn, or does Heimdall have to wrestle it from you? I'll make him do it."

Loki looked at her. Then he looked at Mud. They locked eyes for a minute, though neither betrayed their emotions.

"I'll give it to you if you'll share a drink with your loving dad," he said. "They're on me. I'll have lots of mead to preemptively drown my sorrows."

"A drink," she said flatly. "Nice try, Daddy, but I just used that trick."

"Lulu, think of it. I'll be drunk. It'll be easy to _steal_ the horn from me, because my fingers will loosen."

Of course Lu was focusing on Loki, trying to figure out which pocket of his cloak held the horn, or if his cloak even had pockets. She didn't realize that Mud had bent the lights of the night club around him because Mum hadn't gasped when seeing his outline vanish. Eos instead had slipped Mud his sword, and Harmful had only complained after Mud made him invisible as well.

He had given up freedom of the clouds but not freedom of the rainbows, meaning he could still bend light. Mud sidled behind Loki, who slipped him the horn.

"To Asgard!" His uncle whispered out of the corner of his mouth before resuming his discussion with Lu.

"Lulu, at this moment, a boy is navigating his way to the Norns to rectify your situation. He is going to bargain with them for your life, since he knew about the mountain crumbling."

"And who is this boy?" she asked sarcastically, turning to her cousin. "Mo, is it- Mo?"

"Actually no," Loki said as Lu registered that Mud was gone, that Eos had been too quiet for the past few minutes, and that she had been tricked. "Modi's going to bargain for himself in Asgard, using the horn. He did break a vow to Odin by attacking Magni."

"Oh." Breath caught in Lu's voice as she registered this last part. "Is he daft? Mum, how could you let him go to Asgard? Odin will

punish him! Jarnsaxa-"

"Modi has the horn," Loki spoke over her. "And Jarnsaxa probably isn't experiencing a spike in popularity."

"The horn will appease Odin," Eos said. "Perhaps the same punishment-exile from Asgard."

"Then who is my champion?" Heluth made this come out sarcastically, but she only sounded more terrified.

"Modi's Midgard brother."

* * *

><p>Toothless wasn't happy. He had come along with Hiccup, and Hiccup had agreed because he wasn't like Mud, running off on his own. Astrid had wanted to come as well, but Mom had squashed the idea. You didn't visit the Norns in groups of three, she had said.<p>

Hiccup and his dragon were at the edge of the world, where the World Tree's roots barely brushed the soil. It was cold here, so cold that Toothless's scales offered scant warmth. But this was as far as Mom-his mom was a tree- as far as she could send him.

"No one knows exactly where the Norns live," she had said. "Mud did, but he swore to never tell another living or dead soul. He also swore to never ask to change anyone's fates, least of all his own. You wouldn't survive the trip anyway, and I'm not risking your life."

Dad had only let him go because he said it was a matter of life and death. It was, though it was more a matter of life and fate. Perhaps Dad had already realized, since he said that the snake had killed Magni.

Toothless wanted to soar into the darkness, to let his screech find the tunnel in the roots. And Hiccup had said no, however much faster flying would be. He needed his feet on the ground, even the prosthetic. The earth packed between the roots told him where to go. It spoke to him, like wise men had been burned and buried beneath them. It told him where another Vanir had stepped, to get from the World Tree to Midgard. He followed the trail backwards. Toothless followed with a disgruntled expression, screeching occasionally to find the route.

The earth told him much more, tinged with white fungi and carpets of green algae. It told him of this particular Vanir's memories, his thought process, as he had stepped onto the mortal soil. Hiccup didn't feel receptive at first, but each thought was a stepping stone, telling him where to go. He learned why Magni had betrayed his-their little brother and the dragons on Rainbow Isle.

The Norns had told that Magni could make his father happy by serving the mortals on Midgard. Magni had to stretch his hearing, find a mortal that he could assist with his abilities. He had to find another mortal to possess, whose soul was so corrupt and foul that no one would miss him, and Midgard would not drain his Vanir essence.

At the time, Ivor had been leading raids on Outcast Island, succeeding because he was a big, thinking dragon, and he was determined. Magni had heard Alvin's plea to the gods for assistance, and Magni had looked into Savage's soul.

"So you're saying Magni chose to help ALVIN, out of all the Vikings in the Archipelago?" Hiccup asked with annoyance. Toothless looked at him questioningly. "Vikings pray to the gods every day; couldn't he have chosen a widow to comfort, or a village suffering from a thunderstorm?"

The musty earth did not answer, and Hiccup found himself thinking of Magni's complaints about the Green Death having drained Odin. Odd that he remembered that clearly, Magni's dismay on seeing his father remonstrate him.

The answer was that simple. Magni had looked into Midgard, found someone who had hated dragons as much as he had. He had then found Savage, the perfect soul to disintegrate over a period of months. Few would miss the Outcast, and he could stop the dragons from taking over the Archipelago.

Hiccup, scarily enough, found himself relating. It was like how he had spared Toothless that day in the woods, only Toothless hadn't been a psychopathic Viking willing to hurt children. The difference was that he and Toothless had taken the time to get to know each other, while Magni had leaped into the situation without realizing what kind of monster Alvin was and that Ivor had been trying to save his fellow dragons.

Thor's son had gotten in over his head.

"Great. I have something in common with Magni," he said to Toothless. The dragon whapped him with the tail-fin. "Fine, you want to hear the earth's side of the conversation? I'll tell you."

They walked, Toothless less sulky now that Hiccup filled the dim air with his voice.

"The whole reason Magni followed Mud to the Norns, made his trail in the earth that apparently I can follow, is that Gris had just had her babies. They were the last heirs to the Green Death, and it was a visible reminder to Thor how he had screwed up destiny. He talked about it to his son over a hunting trip, why he couldn't enjoy the kill. Magni was sore about his father's Greatest Failure, in capital letters and about the fact that Odin wasn't watching the Green Death's grandchildren, you and your siblings."

Toothless snorted.

"Yeah, Magni really hated dragons. Apparently so do most in Asgard. Odin didn't, though; neither did Thor nor Loki. Gods, Thor apparently didn't communicate that part to Magni. Why?"

"Because Thor wasn't able to admit that the failure was his and not Mud's," a new voice said.

Hiccup and Toothless stopped. They saw three heads of long white hair, three old ladies spinning at their loom. A fat worm served as a footrest for the one on the left, who apparently was suffering a foot

cramp.

He remembered what Mom had taught him in the short span of a few minutes, found himself bowing. Past, present and future: Urd, Verdandi, and Skold. Mud's teachers.

"My ladies."

"The earth has spoken true to you," The one in the middle said. "I'm Verdandi, by the way."

"You are a hero," Skold said. "But you are not here for rewards, are you?"

Hiccup shook his head. "What I want, I'm willing to pay for it. To change Heluth Lokisdatter's fate so that she lives despite Ragnorak. So that she can travel to Midgard like any other Vanir, without dying."

They looked surprised, as if Toothless had decided to release a wriggling fish from his jaws. The worm actually met their eyes. Urd, the one of the left, had to recover first.

"You do not ask for yourself, or for Mud? Why?"

"Heluth . . ." Hiccup paused. "When I was in the earth, Heluth let me live. I felt her push me back into my body. She helped us, despite being an outcast and condemned by fate. She had also saved me before."

"Ah." Verdandi recovered next. "You want to repay that debt. But that's not the only reason."

"No." He had to be honest. The Norns hated liars. "She took care of Mud in all those years that I couldn't. And she called Loki, so that he knew to rescue my mom's ghost from Alvin. She was . . . who I should have been."

"You would have not had a happy life if Mud had been born on Midgard." Skold shook her head. Her hair was like loose white silk. "But you are right. Heluth has shown remarkable altruism despite how her thread came out. We will change her fate."

"You are lucky she has not died yet," Verdandi said. "Then you would have had to serve the Vanir for a thousand years."

Hiccup forced a laugh. "Then what is my price?"

"This." Skold took out a bright red and brown thread, mixed with flecks of black. "This was Magni's fate; we took it as a price for the information we gave him. He thought he didn't need it, only Thor's approval."

Wow. Magni must have had a death wish. But then, would Hiccup have done the same thing to earn his father's approval?

Unfortunately, yes. There WAS that treasure hunt, for example.

"You could be seen as a hero, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock," Skold said. "But only if you were to choose a less controversial fate to change."

Heluth is seen as the being that causes death, although she merely organizes the afterlife. Those of Asgard who could idolize you. Instead, they will hate you and make your destiny more difficult. They will believe that you can't handle it as a mere mortal."

"We know you can, however," Verdandi added. "You're a tough Viking."

"That's not Heluth's fault that she's queen of the Underworld," Hiccup said. "That's the job Odin gave her." _Because you told Odin that she'd lead the rebellion against the gods in Ragnorak._

"We cannot change your mind then?"

He shook his head, held out his hand. "I don't deserve to be a hero. If it weren't for my stupidity, Alvin wouldn't have known to train dragons, and Ivor wouldn't have fought him. Magni wouldn't have betrayed the gods in the name of service." He touched the spot on his chest where the rune stone had once attached itself. "That's why Ivor gave me the stone, instead of returning to Rainbow Isle. He knew that I had to help fix this mess."

Urd got up. Toothless sniffed at her footrest of a worm. She took the offered hand and smiled. Amazing how it lit up her ancient face, and Hiccup could see how Mud would have learned from her, how he would have liked these ladies.

"No," Urd said. "That's not why."

"Then why?"

Skold wrapped the red and brown thread between Hiccup's fingers. He could feel the weight of his future, of having to rebuild a ruined, war-torn world. She took another strand from her loom, let it turn bright blue. Heluth's fate, tied into his. This wove into the red and brown.

"Ivor didn't give you the stone because you caused this conflict," Urd said. She kept smiling as Magni's fate entered Hiccup. "It's because he knew you would fix it."

30. Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mud only realized how much his body ached after traveling the Bifrost. He had closed his eyes, but the movement soared into his groan and made him bite his lips inward. Alvin's blood was still on them, so he wiped his mouth.

It was a good thing that the babies had repaired the Bifrost, though Mud did not know it had been damaged. If they hadn't, then he wouldn't have been able to come here. He would only learn later, after returning to Midgard and to Berk.

He stood in a gleaming throne room, and by habit he knelt. Odin sat on the golden throne, wearing his gold-embroidered cloak and winged helmet. He never needed a crown, what with that one eye that saw everything. Two wolves lounged by his throne. Mother Frigga sat at a smaller throne,

Mud closed his eyes, kept kneeling. This was Valaskjalf, Odin's hall in Asgard when he wasn't in Valhalla. Of course Harmful would bring him here directly, being made of rainbow crystal. He realized that he was damp from the Green Death's water, barefoot covered in dirt and had blood on his hands. Nevertheless, he brought out Heimdall's horn and held it out.

"Modi, son of Thor and Eos, child of Fire and Thunder. You come at a most appropriate time."

Mud bent his head in acknowledgment, hands shaking as they held the horn. Training with the Norns made him twist his emotions inward, to hide them. Now was not a time to collapse from exhaustion.

"When you were an infant, you took a vow to never harm yourself, and to never harm your brother Magni. One of those vows has been broken. You know the consequences."

"Exile from Asgard. Confinement to the Underworld," Mud said. He kept his voice neutral, emotionless. That previous time, when he had taken the vow and accepted confinement, it had seemed like a huge shame. Now, it didn't matter. Hiccup was safe. The babies were safe.

"Yet you did break the vow. Why?"

Odin was needling him, because the All-Father could just peel his mind open and find the answer. He wanted to hear how Mud would answer.

Great gods, why didn't I stay on Midgard? It was just a graze on Magni's cheek! Magni was burying me alive!_

"He was attacking my cousins, children of Gris, and my Midgard brother," Mud said. "After having killed my cousin Nephil. I was scared he would kill Gris's children. I accept the consequences for my action."

That lone black eye focused on him. The ravens flew down, grabbed the horn from his small, shivering palms and brought it to the All-Father. Odin's wolves stood up and watched him as well.

"So you choose exile from Asgard once more?"

"That is my choice," Mud said, though there wasn't a choice at all. "I will live out my days on Midgard and raise my cousins until they can take care of themselves."

"Such a large task for a small child."

"There isn't anyone else to take care of them." An edge came to Mud's voice. He coughed, trying to keep it down. "And I won't be alone. Mortals on Midgard will help, good mortals."

"You do not seem upset." Odin fixed his gaze on Mud. "You do not know what the task entails."

I got an idea when you sent me to live with Gris and Ivor, Mud thought._ I gave you the horn, I did everything you asked for, and it's still not enough. This is how Green turned against you!_

"I don't. But I have to do it, because no one else will." _ Or can.

—

Odin nodded. He stood so that his cloak billowed around his feet and tickled his wolves' fur. It may have been that Mud hadn't seen him for a year, but the All-Father's back seemed taller, straighter. There was commotion from outside the throne room, a woman screaming in anger.

"You did a great service for us on Midgard, Modi, helping restore my essence and magic that the Green Death had stolen and returning Heimdall's horn. If not for the rune stone you created, your Midgard brother would not have succeeded, and we would have suffered an early Ragnorak."

And yet you're going to exile me because of one scratch on Magni's cheek. Again. And no one will speak of Magni's treachery.

"Before I make the pronouncement, let me inspect your mind, to see what has happened. It will be for the last time." Odin came closer and knelt as well. His right hand, the one with his great ring, pressed against Mud's forehead. He flinched, remembering how Alvin had tried the same thing.

"Do not fear me, child. I won't hurt you."

You already have. But it doesn't matter, because you're the All-Father. Whatever you say, goes. I'm not going to insult you. I'm not stupid.

The commotion got louder, and Mud's knee was going numb. He remained in place, shut his eyes as the All-Father's fingers opened a gateway to his brain, to his memories. His mouth opened in pain and recollection.

That's when a large woman, one dressed in black and crying, stormed in. Her veil of mourning wove around her thick hair, and her skin had a tinge of blue frost. She saw the kneeling child on the floor and charged. Mud didn't hear the keening, couldn't move out of the way in time. Harmful could only give a feeble buzz of color and swing, exhausted from channeling the Bifrost and from protecting Hiccup.

"Why did you kill my son!"

"Jarnsaxa! I forbid—"

Her blue fist, the size of a cannonball, swung forward. Mud grunted as the blow knocked him from Odin's grasp.

It was ironic. Mud had survived Magni partially burying him alive, the Green Death trying to drown him, Alvin torturing him, and it was an angry mother who brought him down. Someone who could have been _his _mother, if she had made the effort.

Someone else shouted, someone who shouldn't have been there. It wasn't possible. Mud couldn't exactly say that; his mind was still open for peeling, and blood started to fill his mouth.

* * *

><p>Hiccup should have arrived sooner. The Norns had told him to journey at Asgard through the World Tree, to use Magni's marks so that he'd arrive at Odin's Hall Valaskjalf. NotValhalla, they had stressed. He had taken his time because the marks in the earth had been fading, and one could get lost for centuries within the World Tree's roots. Toothless hadn't liked how the light had gotten dimmer, nor that they couldn't fly without getting horribly lost.

But Hiccup had known they were going the right path. He had also felt Mud's footprints here, ancient steps of a hesitant student. That had given him hope. So had the light that exploded onto their weary faces. Toothless had hidden his head under his wings for the first moment.

They has seen the flat, green pastures of Asgard, felt the pristine blue sky beaming at them. Hiccup had felt the air seeping into him, the delicious air of permanent spring that promised change for the better. Toothless had felt the same, from the way he was bounding through the fields. Warriors on the plains had cried out in alarm, but then they had seen the blue and green pattern on Hiccup's left hand. It had grown into a full-blown tattoo.

The Norns had told him to go to Valaskjalf directly, that he would find his brother there so they could journey home together. He had hopped on Toothless, and flown. In hindsight, this was stupid because they could have been shot down, but neither dragon nor rider could resist. They had soared, and because of the delightful laughs escaping Hiccup's mouth, as well as the blue tattoo, no one shot.

That joy had died when they had landed on the Hall's steps. He had heard the wailing and the pounding of large fists against a thick throne room door. Instinct had told him and Toothless to fly in, that it would be faster than explaining things to the guards. The guards had looked at his left hand anyway and beckoned him onward.

Hiccup and Toothless arrive just to see Jarnsaxa- who had to be the giant blue woman in that black mourning gown- swing her fist into a kneeling Mud's cheek. The boy had collapsed, dazed eyes open with shock and instinctively retreating from the large woman. His cheek turned blue with cold, and blood seeped from his open mouth. Odin stood in front of him with anger, but Jarnsaxa wasn't listening.

"He's going to be exiled, Jarnsaxa-"

"Exile isn't enough! It won't bring my Magni back! I want his blood."

"Plasma blast, warning shot!" Hiccup ordered. Toothless fired so that the fire made Jarnsaxa jump from the All-Father. That's when Hiccup got a better look at Mud, and felt a guilty jolt. His younger brother looked battered, wet and bloodstained, at least on the arms. And now he wasn't moving.

"How dare you." She stood tall, taller than Odin, and her fists were as large as concrete blocks. "Do you know who I am?"

"Unfortunately yes." Hiccup locked eyes with her. "You're the crazy giant lady that Thor somehow found charming. I honestly don't know what he saw in you."

This was going too far, but Hiccup had used up his politeness with the Norns, and Jarnsaxa didn't deserve politeness. She had hit Mud while he was down, and the blow had left a mark.

"You realize that none of this would have happened if YOUR SON hadn't decided to turn traitor and work with the most evil Viking in the Archipelago, just to please Thor? If you had realized he was a dangerous psychopath when he tried to bury a toddler alive, just to prove a point?" Hiccup kept walking towards her, shaking with anger. Toothless followed, probably the only reason that Jarnsaxa hadn't started punching the daylights out of him.

"_Modi_ almost killed Magni that day." She practice spat out his brother's name. "And on Magni's birthday too!"

"He was a baby!" Hiccup shouted. "Are you cowardly that you'd put a three-year old into exile for defending himself against a teenager?"

"Cowardly?" She raised her fist. "You dare call a woman of Asgard cowardly?"

Toothless swung in front of Hiccup and narrowed his eyes. Odin had picked up Mud, had his fingers on the boy's forehead. He was frowning but not focusing on any person in particular.

"Yes, I dare! Jotun coward! You know that your son killed a baby dragon just because Nephil was a runt and he let a murderous Viking torture my brother!"

"It was just a dragon," she said. They circled each other, Jarnsaxa with her fists and Hiccup with his words. "Dragons are the reason that fate unraveled, that Odin got hurt."

"I'm beginning to see the resemblance between you and Magni," Hiccup said. "Beginning to see why he was such a _daft bairn _with pudding for brains. He wasn't supposed to be born first, wasn't he?"

Jarnsaxa sucked in her breath; she smelled like flecks of soil sprinkled across a frozen mountain. Her shadow grew. Hiccup kept circling, thinking what the earth and Magni's footprints had him in the World Tree.

"You were jealous of the fact that a dragon, my _mother_, was going to bear one of Thor's children, and that Thor defied destiny to be with you first instead of lying with her. You were scared that it would come back to bite you in the-"

"Language," Odin chided, almost absentmindedly. Mud's eyes closed, and he seemed to relax in the All-Father's arms.

"The only thing that kept you safe in Asgard was having Magni," Hiccup went on. "He was another child of destiny, and that gave you immunity to be scum. When Mud- Thor's second son- appeared after hundreds of years, you were scared of karma, so you turned Magni

against him. Called my brother a changeling, made Magni think he was the center of the universe."

"Your brother?" She gave a malicious laugh like icicles crashing to the ground. "That explains why you're no bigger than a flyspeck. And just as stupid."

"If I'm the stupid one, how come I'm the one who restored the Green Death's magic to the Archipelago and Odin?" Hiccup shot back. "Magni on some level knew that you were wrong. He knew that ignoring my brother and treating him like scum was like ignoring destiny; you do that, it bites you hard. But you made Magni hate my brother so much that he knew they'd never be close. So he gave up his destiny to the Norns because he knew he could never live up to it. He couldn't change what you made him into."

"Ladies, settle down," Odin murmured. One of the ravens flew off his shoulder and towards the hall entrance.

"Gave up his destiny? Ha! My Magni would never do that!"

"He did." Hiccup showed his left arm. "The Norns gave it to me because they knew I could handle it better."

Jarnsaxa sucked her lips in and studied it. "That's a tattoo. That doesn't mean anything."

"Then how come Magni died at the serpents' hands? And how can I do this?" Hiccup stamped his prosthetic into the ground. A pillar of earth came up, rectangular and pointy at the end, crushing through the throne room's polished carpet.

Toothless reared. Jarnsaxa jumped back as if stung by an entire bee colony. She stared at the rocky formation, and then at the colored marks on Hiccup's hand.

"No. He wouldn't have. Magni knew his destiny was important."

"Not as important as making Thor happy." Hiccup didn't feel like coddling her. "He revealed what he really was outside of Asgard, once he no longer had to live up to destiny. So, your immunity's gone."

"Odin!" She turned to the All-Father. "You cannot believe this little boy! He is friends with the dragons!"

Odin drew himself to full-height, carrying Mud in his arms. Hiccup was scared to see his brother not moving, with small breaths. The single, ancient eye focused on Hiccup.

"This 'little boy' risked his life to restore my essence," he said. "I felt it in my limbs this morning. He did not accept Magni's destiny to benefit himself but to help someone deserving gain a reward. Perhaps you have had favor for too long, Jarnsaxa."

That, not the Night Fury growling at her, or the pillar of earth that Hiccup now made collapse, made her stop talking. She stood open-mouthed at the All-Father, looking as though he had slapped her across the face.

"Please go, Lady Jarnsaxa. I need to speak with this child of destiny privately. Wait until Thor comes back so that you can grieve properly."

She left, but one of the wolves followed her. The other sniffed the hole in the carpet and started scratching itself over the gap.

Hiccup walked toward Odin, noticed how dirty and bedraggled Mud looked. It was scarier than when he had first seen his brother unconscious, all those nights ago. At least he looked peaceful here.

"You realize that you spoke impertinently," Odin said sternly. "And you tore a hole through my throne room."

Hiccup used his anger as a shield. "I did, but at least I admit when I make mistakes. Did she hurt my brother, All-Father?"

"Not terribly. Those with Vanir essence find ourselves able to take a punch." Odin observed him. "You learn well, son of Stoick and Eos, but some bad habits you find yourself clinging to. Your impulsiveness, for starters."

He had the grace to blush, angry as he was. It was one thing for Mud to criticize him for being impulsive, but the wise ruler of the gods? Pure embarrassment.

"You took a huge risk, restoring what was deeded to you to its rightful place. And then bargaining with the Norns and picking a fight with Jarnsaxa. The only reason I did not smite you with my spear was because of the former, certainly not the latter two. If you wish to speak disrespectfully, you must always ask permission first."

Hiccup opened his mouth. He moved closer to examine his brother.

"That is the way of Asgard. Your brother knows the rules better. You think that I was unfair to Modi by confining him to the Underworld for blowing up a third of Asgard, when he had been defending himself. That I shouldn't have destined you and your dragon to defeat your grandfather, the Green Death, with what little influence I have over fate, because family shouldn't fight one another."

"Those thoughts are coming to mind," Hiccup admitted.

"Mortals have a right to be angry, for we gods do influence events and living beings according to our whims. I claim fault in destiny having not stayed the course. But I had my reasons. "

The raven came back, along with a beautiful, raven-haired goddess. She was not as tall as Jarnsaxa, and there was a calm fire to her eyes that somehow tempered itself. She carried a basket filled with grapes, wheat sheaves, and a rainbow phone oddly enough. Her dress rustled like a field of grain on a warm autumn day.

"Freya!" Hiccup gasped. The lady smiled at him, and he felt tempted to fall on his knees. Toothless snorted, bringing him back to reality. Good thing Vani didn't impress dragons.

"Our best healer in Asgard," Odin agreed. "Not to mention the most beautiful."

Freya bowed, her round cheeks pink with pleasure. She took Mud in her arms and frowned. She ran her fingers over his legs and navel, wiped the blood from his mouth and kept frowning.

"I need to look at him properly in my home, All-Father. This will require extra attention and deep sleep."

"As you deem fit. Make sure Jarnsaxa does not enter your healing chamber."

"Always."

"What do you mean extra attention?" Hiccup asked sharply. He came closer. "Is he seriously injured?"

"In some places. Who did this to him?" Freya asked softly, pointing to the navel.

"A man called Alvin the Treacherous, a man rotting in the Underworld," Odin said. "Jarnsaxa just administered a blow."

Freya gave an unladylike swear. Hiccup stared, her enchantment on him- perhaps it was an actual enchantment and not just her beauty-broken, for the moment. That allowed him to approach, trembling with anxiety.

"Toothless can lick him!" he blurted out. "Night Fury saliva-"

"Excellent for external injuries, not for internal," Freya said. "He suffered from severe muscle cramping that has torn the inner organs. I'm amazed he was able to stand."

"He's Vanir," Odin said. "We know how to stand after a great fall."

This seemed to be directed at Hiccup, who remembered his earlier line of thinking. He stroked back Mud's hair where it curled around the forehead.

"Why did you confine Mo- Mud, my brother? Why give me and Toothless a destiny that nearly got us both killed and exiled?"

"The Underworld was the safest place for Modi at the time," Odin said. "Away from Jarnsaxa's poisonous words and Magni's influence. It allowed him to grow with people who truly loved him. Though there were mishaps along the way."

"Yes," Hiccup said flatly. "He tried to kill himself by freeing Loki's children. Those were mishaps."

"Gods make mistakes as often as we have success, Son of Stoick. Just because we are powerful does not mean we are perfect." For the first time, the All-Father looked weary. "What matters is what you do with those mistakes, how you learn from them. I have to learn because I have to be wise, but you chose to. You had the capability to cause

change."

"Dragon's blood," Freya murmured.

"Quite right. As for why the Green Death's kin having to bring him down? Because Green would never have killed his grandchildren while he still had a soul; that much of him remained. When he lost his soul, he lost that compassion, but by then you were born, as was the Night Fury."

"That still didn't give you the right to treat Mud like an outcast for all those years." Hiccup pointed out. "He never thought he could live up to his destiny. He thought that no one in Asgard believed that he could help rebuild the world. Would it have killed to tell him he was going on the right path?"

"Who do you think invented these devices?" Odin pointed to the rainbow phone. "These so-called 'cell phones' that are not meant to be crafted for roughly nine hundred years?"

Hiccup looked at the rainbow phone, as well as at the purple crystal he had strapped to his waist. Toothless also examined it, peering at the crystal.

"He did?"

"Took a modern appliance and tested to see if it would work on rainbow crystal," Odin said, almost with envy. "He managed to do something that most Vanir and not even the Norns could do."

"Created a swift means of communication, even if the idea was not originally his," Freya said proudly. "Helps me stay organized and in touch with most of my brethren. These rainbow phones becoming swiftly popular."

Hiccup stared at her. Odin withdrew from the pair.

"There is more than one way to respect a hero, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, and we Norse gods are stubborn about giving praise. But we do give praise when heroes and innovators deserve notice. Think of that before we meet next. You are both dismissed."

Hiccup had no choice but to follow Freya; she carried Mud as if he were a china doll. Toothless offered his saddle, so the goddess set Mud on the dragon and strapped him there. Hiccup took large steps to keep up with their pace, a hand to keep his brother's body steady as Toothless walked.

If he had looked back, he would have seen the All-Father watch with a relieved smile.

31. Chapter Thirty

Hiccup watched and made an effort to not hover. Freya had told Toothless to carry Mud to a separate chamber that seemed to serve as an infirmary. The floor here was plainer, the lights gleaming with a detailed rather than awe-striking intensity. There were several beds and a wooden table covered in a soft, fluttering cloth. The edges were fringed and marked with Odin's eye.

Freya removed Mud's sword first before removing him from the Night Fury's back. She laid him on the wooden table and ran her fingers over him. The blue skin from Jarnsaxa's blow faded at her touch. Yet she didn't look happy.

"That was the easy part," Freya murmured. Then she turned to Mud's navel, pressed against a spot that made him gasp. Hiccup flinched.

"I'm here, Mud." He grabbed his younger brother's hand. It was cold, but not the cold that labeled death. He stroked and tried not to fret.

"Hiccup, I don't think I can heal what Alvin has done to him. The damage to his organs happened when he had restored Vanir essence-when he was supposed to be at the height of his strength."

"What happened?" he asked, more harshly than intended.

"These organs; they've become twisted, so they are not receiving the blood they need. The term is called 'torsion,' and they should have been treated immediately." Her voice became weary.

"Is he going to die?"

"No, but the damaged parts will. They have to be removed."

"Which damaged parts?"

She pointed more vigorously. When Hiccup understood, he blocked her elegant hand with his left one.

"You can't!"

"I don't have a choice." She sounded angry, not at him. "What's the point of knowing how to heal if there are injuries beyond your abilities? What's the point of having power?"

She seemed more upset about the potential operation than he did. Which didn't make sense. It wasn't like she was the one with guilt coursing through his veins and desperation.

"I know what it means. He'll never have children, never achieve puberty properly, and will remain a soprano for the rest of his life. But I don't have a choice." Her tone held finality. "Odin told me to heal him, and I must. No matter what the sacrifice."

_Why did I have to restore the magic just as Alvin attacked? _Hiccup thought with bitterness. _Why did I have to let it hypnotize me, the idea that I had to make a sacrifice? _

Freya took a pouch from her waist. The pouch held a small bone knife, one that should have been used to cut fruit. Not that fruit existed on Berk this time of the year, even during Eos week. Hiccup knew it was sharp, however, when it nicked the table and left a deep gouge.

"I knew your mother, Eos," she said softly, straightening Mud's limbs on the table. He remained sleeping. "When Odin changed her from

dragon to maiden, he asked me to care for her. And I did, teaching her my ways of healing and with plants. She had enough green thumbs to share among the Asgardians, though many disliked her for being frail."

Hiccup remembered Mud telling this story in the cavern, though it was different with Freya's sad eyes and her sharp bone knife. He found himself clutching Mud's hand with his, holding tightly. His brother's fingers responded by clenching around his, as if terrified that Hiccup would be ripped away from him.

"My greatest mistake was trying to stop Thor. When the Green Death went insane and absorbed magic, Odin was asleep, and Thor blamed Eos. He tried to reverse her back into a dragon, and I . . ." She swallowed. "I tried to stop him from playing the role of Odin. If not for me, Eos wouldn't have been sent to Midgard. She wouldn't have suffered a Midgard life."

Apparently Freya had little experience talking to mortals. She didn't seem to realize that she had labeled Eos's life with Stoick and Hiccup as "suffering."

"Then I wouldn't have been born," Hiccup quipped; his voice cracked.

"That is the odd thing," Freya frowned. "The way destiny should have worked, you should have been the Child of Fire and Thunder, born dead and Eos killed on Midgard. But the Norns let you live."

Hiccup tried to picture how he would have coped with being born dead, a runt disliked by a brother who wasn't really his brother, and Jarnsaxa. Especially Jarnsaxa and her smothering love for Magni.

He would have coped. But a selfish part of him was glad that he hadn't had to. Being a runt on Berk with Stoick for a dad was hard enough, but being a runt of a god? Small wonder that Mud had brimmed with despair and self-loathing.

"Eos must have loved your father very much," Freya commented as she made the incisions. "Loved him so much that only a great tragedy would tear her and the Child of Fire and Thunder from him instead of the willingness to lie down and die for destiny's sake. Only powerful love could have created a marvelous, determined boy like you."

Her hands kneaded, reshaping the bottom half of Mud, as if his legs and organs were clay. Freya was too elegant for that. Occasionally the small boy gasped or cried out in pain, but he did not waken. The knife cut several times; something pink went into Freya's pouch.

Hiccup forced himself to watch, the way his father must have watched Gobber attach the prosthetic to the missing left foot after the battle with Green Death. This must have been how Dad had felt, the same festering guilt and regret for having not been there, for not being able to be there. At least he hadn't disowned Mud, but he hadn't been there.

Then it was done. Mud was still sleeping, his grip reddening Hiccup's hands. Freya took a small bottle from her pouch, one with a dropper. She opened Mud's mouth and squeezed a few droplets.

"He will be fine. Just let him wake up on his own time and be careful when letting him walk," Freya said as she retied Mud to Toothless's back. Her voice sounded regretful. "I hope you will explain to your father and mother why I had to do this. And tell Eos I'm sorry; I'm sorry for everything, for not supporting her or Modi when I should have."

"Are you sorry that I was born?" That Hiccup could be sarcastic showed his growing relief that Mud had stopped gasping, and the faith that Freya had done a good job.

"Of course not." Freya managed a small smile. She ran her hands over Mud, and he released Hiccup from his grasp. "It means that she created someone worthwhile to manage Midgard. Someone to atone for us imperfect Vanir."

Hiccup rubbed his sore hands. He wished he didn't need to clean up other people's messes.

* * *

><p>Astrid paced back and forth, swinging her axe with one hand. It was night-time, and the stars shone with indifference. The Bifrost gleamed innocently at her as she paced. Gobber had tied a green poultice to her cheek. The babies watched her with wide eyes, Einar and Helgi with small hunting knives between their teeth. They attempted to fence to pass the time, and Ardis didn't even bother snapping at how stupid they were.<p>

Stoick wanted to pace as well and wait, but he was the chief, and the chief had duties. First and foremost was assessing the damage from the morning's battles, and making sure that the village could deal with the amount of supernatural visitors. They had screamed on seeing Fenris, but he proved harmless by ripping trees out of the forest with his teeth and placing them in neat piles so that they could repair their houses. After the initial shock that the wolf destined to kill Odin was obediently helping with the village chores, they let him stay.

Thor had chosen to stay for longer, oddly enough. He hadn't stayed to apologize to Mud, however, or to beg forgiveness from Stoick; he had gone to talk with Snotlout's father. Apparently Snotlout had done Thor, Vali and Vidar a heroic service, and he was rewarded with the title of Thor's Champion. According to Thor, that had meant more than protecting the weak and keeping the balance; it had meant that Thor had privately talked with Spitelout about threatening to not love his son.

"I have lost my son because he wanted to please me and keep me happy," Thor had said by way of explanation. "No other father OR son should suffer the same fate."

Stoick had grunted in agreement, because too much experience with politics had stifled his need to vent righteous fury. Thor had picked up on the sentiment anyway, the two of them standing outside in the early evening. Val had gone to explore the island, to chase the Terrible Terrors from Mildew's abandoned hut, and to comfort Bucket who had wanted to paint her.

"You have every right to be angry with me, Stoick the Vast. I took your second child away from you and could not treat him as my own. If someone had done that to Magni, I would have ripped him in two."

Another grunt from Stoick. His hand had moved to his sword, but he did not mean to strike. Attacking a god was foolish, especially the god of Thunder. Thor was holding the block of amber that encased Magni's body.

"I cannot apologize for that; I could not love a child who was not my own. But know this: your village will never be struck by lightning again, and I will let you live with your family in peace. I only hope that you can repair what I could never fix."

"I will," Stoick had said with defiance. "Where are you off to now?"

"Home. Jarnsaxa is probably in the throes of grief."

Stoick had said nothing.

"I love Jarnsaxa, and I need to be there for her. We've just lost our son. Surely you understand."

Stoick had. Thank the gods that Thor had left after saying that.

The second task was reintroducing his Val to the village. If they had thought seeing Thor and Baldr were amazing, most practically fainted on seeing their chieftainess brought back to life as a wooden lady. They hadn't seen her when Fenris had carried her from Outcast Island, and they hadn't been expecting the wolf to carry someone they had missed for too long.

Val had handled the fainting with Viking ease. She spoke loudly and clearly, explaining that she would assist Stoick with his chieftain duties as well as use her knowledge from Asgard to make the soil more fruitful, so that they would have an ample food supply come winter time, and to ease Berk's medical pains.

"I have been away from Berk too long," she had said, and Stoick could have sworn that her wooden eyes had misted over. "There is much I need to learn about my home."

Home. She was still going to visit to check on Heluth, but apparently the death goddess didn't need her anymore. Val had looked sad when Stoick had asked, so he hadn't pressed the matter.

Bucket was one of the few villagers who had not fainted. He had lifted his hand and hook and clapped them together. Mulch had then joined in. It took a while, but in time dozens of hands clapped and cheered.

Stoick's third task was not worrying about Hiccup, Toothless or Mud. He had believed Val when she had sent their oldest son to the Norns, had explained why he needed to talk with the old ladies who weaved fate. He had waited on the opened mountain as she and Loki had gone into that chilly tunnel, heard the agonized screams that came out. He and the kids hadn't followed because she had explained that their entrance would cause Heluth to die because they were mortal and of

Midgard. Apparently there was such a thing as too many mortals for one divine realm.

"I raised Heluth like my own," Val had said before leaving, and her eyes gained a calm fury. "I do not want to save one of my children at the cost of another."

"Especially at the cost of one of mine," Loki had added.

Val had returned by herself. One of her wooden hairs was missing, and she had said that Loki was staying with Heluth. Apparently the World Tree sap had the amazing ability to help those with dead skin. Heluth's dead side was growing back, slowly.

"I hope she can visit Midgard one day," Val had said. "She would love to see a real sunset for once."

That Stoick had not lamented Alvin's fate when Val tore through the Outcast's skin with thorny dandelion vines and slammed him against the breaking mountains- Val explained when they had a moment to themselves in the hut, attempting to wait together- spoke volumes of how he had agreed with her decision. Alvin hadn't deserved to live after hurting Mud, who despite his amazing powers and ability to redirect lightning was a boy, was his boy. Not to mention the two times Alvin had kidnapped Hiccup, had planned to give him to the Hysterics-

Val had done the right thing. He had comforted her in her guilt at having lengthened Alvin's last moments and having denied him the dignity of a Viking funeral.

Once he had settled his wife's dark thoughts, he came out to join Astrid on her nervous vigil. They watched the Bifrost, even as the night grew darker. Stormfly had nuzzled closer to Astrid, comforting her. The Nadder was careful not to upset the poultice. Fishlegs and the twins had already gone to bed; the excitement of the day had worn them out.

The Bifrost lit with a flash; they had to avert their eyes. Stormfly squawked with alarm but stayed beside Astrid. The babies squealed with pleasure and relief.

"Hiccup!" Astrid had exclaimed; seeing her boyfriend standing tall as if he hadn't nearly lost his soul several hours ago.

"We're okay," Hiccup said by way of greeting; he had his hand on Mud's shoulder, a hand gleaming with blue and green marks. Mud was awake, hands on Toothless's saddle. He was straddling the Night Fury and struggling to stay upright, clutching what looked like a flat, green stone. "Can you carry him, Dad?"

Stoick came forward. Astrid came first, practically sprinting. She stopped and started punching Hiccup. Not one, not twice. Repeatedly.

"Hey!" He covered his arms and backed away. Astrid followed with her fists.

"NEVER- SCARE ME- AGAIN!" She shouted, beating on him. "YOU- NEARLY-DIED! WHY DO YOU DO THAT?"

That's when Hiccup did a surprising thing; he grabbed her wrists and kissed her; that surprised her and Stoick. Normally Hiccup wouldn't touch the shield-maiden, and now he had initiated a kiss. They broke apart, Astrid with a dazed, slightly happy expression.

"I know. And I'm sorry, Astrid. I didn't mean to scare you."

"It better not happen again." She tried to make this sound like a threat and failed.

"I can't let it happen. I have a younger brother to look after now."

"What happened to him?" Stoick asked, taking Mud in his arms. Toothless kept still as the chief untied the straps.

"Occupational hazard," Mud had said, sounding almost delirious.

"I'll tell you when we get back to the house," Hiccup said. He had a serious expression. The babies followed, exuberant but not daring to tackle their cousin.

They returned to the hut. Astrid followed on Stormfly Val scooped up Mud in her arms, kissed Hiccup, and examined the boys. Stoick listened as Hiccup spoke, with Mud occasionally interrupting. His brow narrowed with anger and loss. The babies' scaly ears drooped with realization. Astrid's mouth dropped open with horror.

Just as the chief thought, Asgard never rewarded those who were worthy. Both of his boys had lost a physical part of themselves, the cost of victory. He should be glad that they were both alive. He wasn't. What made him more upset: Mud seemed to be all right with the turn of events.

"Chief," Mud said, and corrected himself. "_Father_", look at it this way. Jarnsaxa could have frozen me in a block of ice or snapped my arm off. Odin could have left me in perpetual insanity with my brains peeled. And you're worried about me never having _children_? When I'm barely a child myself?"

His son wasn't supposed to be this philosophical; he was supposed to be playing with other village kids, getting into mud fights, hitting puberty with defiant sarcasm. Even Hiccup had missed his left leg; why did Mud have to accept his loss?

"You don't have to be formal and call me 'Father,'" Stoick had bent over to push locks off his boy's head. "'Dad' will do. It's done well for Hiccup."

The joyful, exhausted expression on Mud's face eased Stoick's anger at the gods. Val had also listened, and she quivered with anger. She softened when Hiccup passed on Freya's apology and regret.

"I suppose she couldn't have done better. You don't defy Odin, and she was a silly head at times."

There was more talk, about their brief visit to Valhalla before coming home. Toothless wanted to leap with excitement when they

talked about seeing Nephil in the hall and Gris on the mend. He hopped from wall to wall with disbelieving relief.

"He was a small dragon with a big soul," Hiccup said, taking the stone from Mud. Only it wasn't a stone but rather a fossilized dragon scale. It wouldn't have existed outside of Valhalla if Hiccup hadn't made green crystal grow as an outer shell, outlining its texture. Otherwise, it would have been a pocket-sized mirage.

Hiccup didn't mention that Magni was also at Valhalla as a pale, brooding ghost. He hadn't tried to speak to them, and Mud had been too dazed to make the effort. Stoick would learn later when Val took the Bifrost to meet Gris, to reconcile with the sister that she hadn't seen for hundreds of years.

HE BECAME BIG, Ardis said with wonder and surprise. She bit the scale and attempted to scratch it.

THE BIGGEST OF US ALL, Gunhild responded. DID YOU SEE OUR MOTHER?

Hiccup and Mud had; Gris had resumed her duties at the Bifrost. Toothless had chirped and nuzzled her, accepted her as his beloved mother. Mud had hugged her with relief, seeing she was alive.

Her wings had vanished, and bandages as large as bed sheets have covered her back, but she had remained a healthy guardian. Odin had deemed her a worthy guardian for helping to restore magic to the Archipelago and preventing the Vanir from rushing to their deaths. Hiccup looked guilty when reciting that last bit.

OUR MOTHER IS THE BRAVEST DRAGON, Einar said. THOUGH SHE NEEDED OUR HELP.

SHE DOESN'T EVEN NEED A SWORD. Helgi lay down by the fossilized scale. NEITHER DOES NEPHIL. HE'S GOING TO FIGHT FOR VALHALLA WHEN THE REAL RAGNORAK HAPPENS!

HE'S RIGHT, Gunhild said to the astonished mortals. YOU STOPPED RAGNORAK FROM HAPPENING FOR REAL, HICCUP.

"But people still died," Hiccup pointed out. "Just not the right people."

AND **YOU** ARE STILL ALIVE, Gunhild said. WITH A MUCH BIGGER DESTINY THAN YOU HAD BEFORE.

Hiccup looked at the tattoo on his left arm. The blue and green threads seemed to weave into each other to form a diamond-shaped pattern. He swore that the threads moved _through _his skin, always changing.

"I'm going to rebuild the world," he said. "But I have to do it in this life anyway. There are probably a few Hysterics out there, and people now know that gods can be defeated."

"You're not doing it alone," Mud said. "You need someone with a lot of knowledge. And Uncle Loki likes you now."

"And you need someone to look out for you," Astrid said flatly. "The

two of you."

Hiccup found his hand and squeezed it.

"We're going to rebuild the world then. Before and after it ends."

32. Epilogue

****And here we reach the end of the Easter Special! Thank you for reading, everyone, and I hope you enjoyed the journey into epic Norse mythology and pop culture!****

* * *

><p>Several months later . . .

Springtime was ending. The grass near the cove had grown to almost knee-length, and a welcome heat blew over the island of Berk. In time the summer storms would come, although no lightning would hit the village now.

Hiccup sat in the grass and sketched, occasionally chewing his charcoal pencil. He had taken off his leather gloves, which he wore to stave off Fishlegs's curiosity about the shifting tattoos on his left hand. His fingers had grown long, and his nails were thick.

The flowers that had sprung from Ivor's blood surrounded him like parts of a fairy ring. He accepted them the way he accepted his Dragon Academy duties. They comforted him with responsibility and faith. Faith that he could succeed.

Toothless lay in the cool shade a distance away. He turned in his doze and stretched his wings, enjoying the peace and quiet. Four Night Fury babies could make plenty of noise.

Damp footsteps. Boots with an inch of heel to them, a vest fluttering in the wind. Long black hair flowing with seawater, a heavily accented voice.

"I thought you'd be here. Your dad said you were taking the day off."

He waited as Heluth bent her knees. She wrapped tattooed arms around his neck. Then he felt her fist dig into his head. Her black hair brushed against his shoulders and flew like an unwanted curtain. Toothless warbled out a greeting.

The noogie of immortality, Snotlout had called it, after Astrid had laughed for three hours. Astrid had been worried that Heluth would make unwanted advances toward Hiccup - she hadn't forgotten Heather playing the boys like harp strings- but now she never worried. Heluth treated Hiccup the way she treated Mud, like a bossy older sister who had hundreds of skeletons at her beck and call, and she could only visit once or twice a month at the most, when Fenris was willing to swim from the back door to Berk. Mud and Mom visited her more often, using the Bifrost.

"What are you drawing?"

He showed her. She sat down, wearing a brown fur vest and pants identical to his; another benefit of knowing how to use glamours for fashion purposes. The sap from the World Tree had made the skin regrow on the dead half of her body, an exact copy of the left side, so that she had a perfectly symmetrical face with a square chin. Her eyes danced with wicked black amusement, each pupil a crescent of shiny ebony. Her smile added to her sweet creepiness.

"Dragons. Cool."

He kept sketching as she started to unwrap a bundle. It wasn't just any dragon; he was trying to picture what his mother had looked like when she was a dragon, which wasn't easy. He could only go by how Gris looked, and the memories of the scrawls that the Green Death had painted. Later he'd find paint for the yellow skin.

"Here. Late birthday present." She handed him the bundle. He gave her a bemused look.

"My birthday was months ago."

"Hence the 'late' part. Heimdall made it for you."

The bundle was thick cloth; he found the end and started unwrapping it. The charcoal pencil fell into his lap, leaving a smudge.

"Mud mentioned that you wanted one," Heluth said cheerfully. "It was my first day off in weeks, so

I thought I'd bring it. Happy birthday."

The wrapping fell away. Hiccup found himself holding a gleaming rainbow sword with an ornamented, polished handle. Assorted knobs lined the metal, each a difference icon. His jaw dropped as he lifted the sword. Light as air, and swirling with colors.

"Press that button on the handle. You'll like it."

He pressed the knob shaped like fire. Immediately the sword lit up with hot white flames. Toothless shot straight off the ground and pointed his snout towards the sword. Hiccup let go of the knob, and the flames died.

Seeing the danger gone, Toothless lay back down. His eyes remained on the blade, however, with harsh distrust.

Hiccup's mouth remained open. Heluth reached over and closed it. Her hands were cold like the first winter snowflakes.

"Careful. You might swallow a fly."

"I don't know what to say. 'Thank you' doesn't seem like enough."

"Dude, you saved my life and changed my fate. Least I could do was get you a rainbow sword."

"Well," he started, "You saved mine first. Twice, actually. So we're even."

She shook her head at him. "That was for selfish reasons, so you owe me nothing. How's he doing, by the way?"

"Better. We had a setback when Thor asked Mud why Mud hadn't forgiven him, and . . ." Hiccup's smile grew sour. "Mud had a meltdown once he was given permission to speak disrespectfully. I've never seen him so angry. Thor almost incinerated him with lightning bolts. The trees on that part of the island hate us now."

Several months meant ample changes. Asgard had changed Hiccup, so that he had gained an inch in height and a deeper voice; a shame that Mud hadn't received the same benefits. Mom's skin had slowly softened from wood into flesh, so that her fingers no longer felt like thin tree branches and she no longer shed wood chips. A side effect of coming back to life. They didn't know if she would be mortal or Vanir, and Mom didn't care.

"As long as I can take care of you three, I will be fine with how long I live this time," she had said.

Mom and Mud had moved into the chief's house; so had the babies, cuddling up with Toothless. All four Night Furies had doubled in height and weight, and they could fly over the island in the twinkling of an eye. Ardis had attached herself to Snotlout but hissed at Thor, while Helgi and Einar tried to teach themselves how to fence.

And Gunhild? Gunhild guarded the Bifrost where it grew on Berk, and monitored which Vanir came and went. She had greeted Heluth by nipping her and Baldr by nuzzling him. Baldr came to check on Magnus, who grew under his tutelage into a homely toddler.

"That sounds like Thor," Heluth said critically. "But he didn't incinerate Mud."

"No. And Mud's having fewer nightmares. So we're making progress."

Heluth looked to the skies and stroked a red flower. "He's looked happier being here on Midgard with someone to look after him, being in a place where you can see the sun rise and set. You know this is the first time I've seen the sun, or the real blue sky that you mortals have?"

"I did not know. So I'm still mortal, despite you giving me that noogie of immortality?"

"Unfortunately. With the time you spent in Asgard and your destiny of rebuilding the world, you'll take more time to age, but you'll age." She gave a teasing smile. "Which means you could be old and crotchety by the time Ragnarok happens. Especially when Jarnsaxa's kin figures out how to hurt you on Midgard or sabotage your chances of rebuilding the world."

He raised an eyebrow. "I can handle it."

"Yeah. Just try not to die on me again. If I have to rescue you a third time--"

He started to laugh, and then he looked at her face. The amusement had left her black eyes. They contained oblivion, the reflections of tortured souls, and a hint of monstrosity. She was completely serious.

"By the way, Alvin's soul disintegrated mid-torture. He's completely gone."

"What kind of torture?"

"White-hot tattoos, with candle wax heated to a maximum. That's how I got these." She rolled up her sleeve. Skulls with tongues and the occasional severed finger. "Mortal souls can't handle Vanir magic; it drives them insane and slowly breaks them down. Alvin had taken precautions, but he still had used Mo's essence. That would have happened to you if you hadn't been wearing the rune stone."

Hiccup observed. The skulls seemed to wink at him as Heluth described the various tortures she had put Alvin through. Her black eyes and words reminded him that she was a vengeful death goddess, although she acted out of love.

Hiccup had to admit, it made him feel slightly better that Alvin had received eternal punishment. It wasn't enough with the way Mud had accepted never having children, or Mom healing him daily, but it was something. He and Heluth had that much in common.

When she finished, they sat and watched the clouds change shapes. A puffy Night Fury swirled into tendrils of pink smoke. Hiccup practiced swinging his sword and pressing the different knobs.

"So how are you going to change the world?" she asked, plucking flowers. She pressed them to her cheek as if to imprint the soft petals as tattoos.

"First, we make sure that the Vikings remember that the gods are still in power. The Hysterics are going to be the big problem, given they pretty much took notes on how to drain essence, and a lot of Mud's essence was powering their boats. The gods aren't perfect, but they could destroy the world if they wanted to, and Odin has his reasons for making bad decisions. Then we figure out how to teach other Vikings to train dragons without inciting cause for war or for Berk to get destroyed."

"Sounds like you got your work cut out for you."

"I'm sure we could use your assistance," he remarked dryly, "as well as your dad's help."

"That reminds me; Daddy says he also has a late birthday present for you, his thank-you for changing my fate."

Hiccup groaned. Heluth smiled.

"Yeah, he's going to embarrass you to death as his second-favorite nephew. Better get used to it."

"Second-favorite?" he repeated with mock horror. "I only rate second-best in the nephew department?"

"Hey, Momo freed Jo and Fenris. When YOU free one of my brothers or Daddy from an Impossible Task, you'll be able to compete."

He shoved her playfully. She shoved back; there was a playfulness that would never break into romance or drama. Their laughs intertwined like the blue and green lines on his left wrist. Later they'd go back to the chief's hut, where Heluth would bribe Stoick with her finest Underworld ale. Stoick found his new stepdaughter creepy but her intentions pure, and he was not one to turn down a good drink. They'd have a fun evening together, the five of them and Toothless with the four babies.

Springtime. The time when flowers sprouted on the stubborn cliffs, and hardened souls found themselves growing within mortal bodies. Now springtime was over, paving way for the summer, for the long days and longer battles to come.

Celebrate, gentle Vikings, for Eos has been restored to her proper place. Celebrate for the world had not ended, and that the fates have assigned themselves to worthy bearers. Dragons died this spring. So did worthy and unworthy Vanir. But worthier mortals and their dragons did more than survive; they rose and repaired the damage others had caused.

Celebrate the worthy who have risen. Celebrate the small hero who sketches in the grass, ready to face these long days.

End
file.